

Perfect short film story structure...

[admin](#) • August 14, 2015



Story structure for the short film narrative

"These creatures are among us, although morphologically they do not differ from us; we must not posit a difference of essence, but a difference of behaviour." – Phillip K. Dick

Short film story structure is a difficult point in terms of education. Notably, three acts within 10/15 pages can be extremely difficult to get in there when writing based on a solid idea you may have.

Our festivals programming habits have begun to unconsciously prove time and time again, official selection by official selection, that award worthy – ten out of ten – work has to follow these simple rules, in order to fire audience engagement from beginning to end.

Thank you for reading our posts. If you're ever in a position to submit your work to any of our film festivals based around the world, we'd be more than happy to grant discounts as a thank you for engaging with us directly. Simply email us at info@lift-off-festival.com – tell us which festival(s) you'd like to submit to and we'll send you the discount codes... Cheers!

Here is what we have noticed...

The short film's super objective is focused toward the audience.

You follow Lift-Off's four rules for short form filmmaking.

You stick to the simple three act structure and adhere to the point of no return principle (and with an epilogue, maybe).

Your short films super objective.

Always aim for the audience to...

Pay attention from the very beginning.

Engage in the narrative to the very end.

Ask a question of the work.

Turn that question onto themselves.

Feel changed after experiencing the narrative – in some way.

Rule 1. Start immediately.

Title credits have a strange place within a short film. Audiences don't need to know anyone's name, who the director is or, in some extreme cases, what the name of the film is. It is a waste of screen time and in many films where the title credits are 3 maybe even 4 minutes long : audiences disengage, start talking to one another, remove themselves from the initial intention to watch the work. The mistake is easy to make because at times the short filmmaker is wanting to replicate their favourite feature films beginning, but it doesn't work. There really aren't many occasions where it's acceptable for lengthy titles (or credits) – so avoid them.

Rule 2. Observe the set-up.

The first act of your story could start and end on the first page, in the first minute, without any dialogue. We need to know the essence of the drama, this is what makes film festival audiences sit forward.

The film and scene opens immediate behind the head of a man walking with purpose, wearing what looks like a black woollen hat on his head...

...The man walks into a busy bar, a band is playing, Irish voices and the clinks of pint glasses are heard, the man pulls a black balaclava over his face. Everyone in the bar turns to look at him. The band stops playing. The camera moves and zooms PoV from the man toward the drummer in the band...

Drummer

"Fuck"

That's a fairly decent set-up for a short film. Straight in, no bs (that will come later), no dialogue until the absolute breaking point... Are the audience engaged? Yeah.

Rule 3. Enter scenes and start dialogue at breaking points.

When you are devising/writing and coming up with scenes within your work, try to keep the narrative dialogue as small as possible. Characters don't need to be talking, telling the audience who's who, explaining the complicated plot points, or waffling on about nothing. They need to say nothing until it is vital that they speak based on the action and drama that's surrounding them.

This is an age old method which works well, show more, say less.

“I’m tired” is nowhere near as dramatic as seeing a character nearly fall asleep or yawn – we empathise with the physicality of feeling, so show the feeling, don’t tell it and the audience will respond – probably by yawning back – but that’s a good yawn.

Enter the scene late and leaving too early are great writing habits to get into.

People (your audience and our audiences) have very good imaginations. Syd Field gives a great example in his homage to China Town in the book “Screenwriting”, where a scene opens with Jack Nicholson and a female character in the bathroom. Jack has been in a fight, his lip is cut, she wipes the blood clean off of it, he looks at her, the scene ends. The next scene is them laying in bed smoking. That’s economical storytelling at its best, and where time is constraining, we have a great opportunity to give the audience the sex scene for themselves to work out in their own minds. I am convinced that if we didn’t have the sex scene and that kinda irrelevant rave in the 2nd Matrix shown bizarrely in the first act, it would be a greater film by like two stars. Maybe.

The 2nd Matrix was terrible because it – 100% – patronised the audience – and the sex scene looked like whoever wrote it, or directed it, or improvised it, or edited it – had never had sex before.

Why take the risk with that, or many other non-narrative essential elements?

Rule 4. Remove all non-narrative essential elements.

Why did we see the fight? Why did it last 5 minutes? Who is that guy on the boat? I don’t care who won the poker game!

These are the occasional feedback elements we get back from judge to judge, film to film. Fight scenes, sex scenes, irrelevant poker games...the list goes on and on. It’s dead space and the audience can make up something greater and more personal in their own minds – instantly making your film less cringeworthy and a whole lot more engaging. You will find that “cheesy filmmaking” is given to work where the filmmaker is trying to shove everything down our throats.

It’s enthusiastic, yes, but enthusiasm counts for nothing against the sheer might of a disciplined storyteller.

We don’t need to see the shark until the end, a writer without any discipline would have had that bloody shark in every frame.

Short film three act structure and the point of no return.

Acts in short films, which work, tend to be three in number, and are not, necessarily, evenly spaced.

Act 1. The Set-up.

Like with Rule 2, the set-up can be silent, shown, not heard and it appears to work really well looking at the majority of the films we screen, our judges and selection panel seem to prefer it this way. In it’s most simple form the set up is basically...

Who is this? Where are we? Whats happening?

Economic development really helps the audience to sit tight and watch your work.

A prologue isn’t necessarily essential but it does help in providing a hook. Think the opening prologue in Star Wars, that stream of blue writing, if you read it, you’re in.

Prologues help to build the world, so this works great within the science fiction and

fantasy genres for instance just so people are relatively up to speed with the world, and the environments dramatic and technological content.

Act 2. The protagonists enter a point of no return.

This is best described by the late great Dan O'Bannon, the writer of *Alien* and contributor to the ill fated but fascinating journey of 'Jodorowsky's *Dune*'.

A point of no return is the moment we watch the character make a few choices which ultimately take them so deep into the drama that there is simply no going back. They must deal with the problem or face dire circumstances, consequences, shitty situations and ultimate hardship.

Many filmmakers instinctively get this right, we as a species have been telling stories for thousands of years, just like walking, storytelling is in our DNA, it is instinctual – which is why the point of no return gives us all as writers this great moment when we turn up the gear and start writing like humans possessed, possessed with thousands of years of cave men and women telling their grandchildren about wholly mammoth hunting, and saber-toothed tiger pet-ownership...gone wrong.

Where it tends to fail is at the stakes of the drama. Renegade milk delivery guy decides to become a vegan. Is nowhere near as interesting as renegade milk delivery guy decides to free all the cows across all the dairy farms of Dorking, the point of no return would be the moment he first lets the very first cow loose and into freedom. Raise the stakes.

Act 3. Resolution or tie-up.

Simple, end your film. Easy to write, but my god, hard to-do. How the hell do you end? Coming to a resolution can be tough. Does the antagonist have the last say? Does the protagonist get away? Or do we end with it completely open ended? Either way your audience wants to feel changed by watching your work so give them something here. Maybe the milk delivery dude gets chased out of town by a bunch of horny – quite literally – bulls who are peeved at the fact that all the cows have buggered off? Who knows.

Something needs to be given here as a clean snip to the story, a perfect slice that marks the end of the fable.

If you're stuck with an ending...

A great way to solve ending issues would be to have three people read your script. Three of the most honest you know. Get them to read it all the way to the end of act two and then ask them how they want it to end. Perhaps give them a strong cup of coffee before they take it on so you get a strong and enthusiastic answer. Whatever the three give you, reflect on the information for a few days and then return back to the keyboard and finish the third act.

Maybe have an epilogue...maybe.

If you feel that it's been tough for them. Especially good in action films, I've only seen this used a few times in shorts but it does work well, when your audience have been on a bit of a mental journey.

A reflection of the action, a kinda well this was that and now it's this and everything is fine, type of thing.

The best epilogue in a feature film I can think of, it still leaves a lot to be desired, is in *Blade Runner*. The final scene which basically says, we all turned out okay, here we are in a car driving in the sunshine. Maybe not the best epilogue actually, hopefully you get where I'm coming from with this. "I never did see those cows

again, but I knew they were free and who gives a rats about Dorking anyway, that town is filled with bullshit now”.

Best of luck with your next project!!

They tell a story of one character’s or couple’s journey—but no more. These shorts don’t overreach. Remember: A short film is not a feature. It has little room for subplots, secondary characters, montages, or epic scope. It covers a [single dilemma](#) and resolves it in some way by the end. Too often, writers attempt to confront multiple dilemmas, introduce us to more than two main characters, or recreate a whole chunk of their feature film. A short is not the place for any of that. It’s the chance to attack one major scene or conflict—nothing more. *Takeaway: Limit your reach. Utilize the “short” part of this medium by telling just one story and telling it well.*

They use available resources. Notice that the two live-action films I linked to have few or no effects shots. They don’t have explosions, car chases, spaceships, or lasers. Instead, the drama and tension come from highly personal stories that take place mostly in enclosed environments (because those are easiest to film in). Don’t try to replicate movies with budgets of hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars—because you can’t. Just make what you have look as good as possible. *Takeaway: Use the cast, crew, locations, and equipment you have; don’t try to replicate Hollywood movies’ effects. That simply won’t look good.*

They feature memorable characters. Film and TV are about characters; even the biggest special-effects-heavy movies are nothing without memorable leads. Gun battles, alien invasions, the apocalypse—they’re all really about *the characters these events happen to*. These short films demonstrate that the filmmakers can build characters that sear themselves in our mind, even in the space of just 10 or 15 minutes. Plot, twists, and story are all important, but without someone we can empathize with, your film will be forgotten. *Takeaway: Give your characters strong personalities, quirks, wants, and goals. That way, we’ll care about them, and willingly follow them on their journey.*

There’s a twist at the beginning and a twist at the end. In all of these shorts, the story is unpredictable; we’re constantly kept on our toes. And the endings bring an even deeper surprise. For example, in *The Crush*—[spoiler alert](#)—not only was the boy not using a real gun, but he was indeed correct about his teacher’s fiancé not being good enough for her; the boy helped prove his cowardice. It’s a beautiful twist. This is exactly what viewers want in every television show, feature film, and short film, no matter what the genre: Set up our expectations, then subvert them. *Takeaway: Don’t make a predictable movie. Put in as many twists as possible—especially in the first minute and the final minute.*

Their outlook is largely optimistic (or they at least end on an upbeat note). It’s relatively easy to say something cynical about human nature, relationships, or people’s greed. But can you find something positive in even the darkest story, while still being true to your vision? If you can leave the viewer with at least a moderately positive impression, they’ll be more likely to remember your work. This isn’t to say that you need to add an upbeat, rom-com-style ending to a story that doesn’t warrant it. But do challenge yourself to see if your ending can be more of an upper than a downer. *Takeaway: End with a positive spin, if at all possible.*

If you can create memorable characters, demonstrate a unique worldview, and use the visual medium of film to demonstrate your personal connection to an intriguing, unpredictable situation, you’ll create a short film that everyone wants to see.

- See more at: <http://www.scriptmag.com/features/7-simple-secrets-making-a-short-film#sthash.eVYKHV6a.dpuf>