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Writing for Film, TV and Radio

Reflective Essay

Word Count 959

## Search and Rescue

In this essay, I will discuss how I have used Aristotle's three-act structure to organize Oliver Murphy's quest in my pilot, *Search and Rescue*, to save his deadbeat father in Mexico. I will examine the protagonist's ongoing battle with mental illness and how no two battles are the same. I will draw on the literary theory of structuralism and how it relates to mental illness to explain the complexity of Oliver's ongoing struggle. I will touch on how the use of language can show how we speak differently overtime as individuals.

In my original draft, the number of flashbacks to present-day scenes was equal, resulting in there not being much structure or compelling conflict at all. Final Draft's article, *Three-Act Structure: The foundation of screenwriting*, explains how storytelling with a beginning, middle and end is the 'the closest reflection of an entire life cycle,' which made it evident that I had to make some major cuts.<sup>1</sup> I was overly focused on explaining the history between the characters, causing the structure of my pilot to fall flat. Afterall, 'a screenplay is a story told with pictures, in dialogue and description and places with the context of dramatic structure,' and until all these aspects are incorporated, I don't believe it can be successful.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Final Draft, *Three-Act Structure: The foundation of screenwriting*, (2022)  
<<https://blog.finaldraft.com/three-act-structure-the-foundation-of-screenwriting#:~:text=At%20its%20core%2C%20the%20three,to%20the%20Greek%20philosopher%20Aristotle.>>

<sup>2</sup> Syd Field, *Screenwriting* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994) p. 10

For my second draft, I planned for my pilot to follow a voyage and return plot. I envisioned Oliver returning home with Terry by the end and for the rest of the series to focus on the aftermath. However, due to the wordcount guidelines, I found the quest to be more suitable for my pilot. Furthermore, I needed there to be enough compelling substance left for the rest of the series. Unfortunately, getting Terry's health in check, reuniting with the family who doesn't speak to him anymore, and potentially getting him situated in a care home is not enough to keep an audience engaged for an entire series.

Finally, I settled somewhere in the middle. I wanted to make sure there was enough insight into Oliver's complex mental health struggle while incorporating enough of Terry's whereabouts for comic relief. Staying true to the three-act structure, I cut over half of the flashback scenes and kept only two that not only show the viewer Oliver's history with mental health and his relationship with his father, but also show the contrast of who was then and who he is now.

The most crucial element of *Search and Rescue* is the complexity of Oliver's battle with mental health. My goal is to have the viewer wanting more because from experience, I know that mental battles are unpredictable and underdeveloped in many series today.

With Oliver's character, I wanted it to be known from the beginning that he is medicated. This immediately poses questions for the viewer. I have a family member who has been on anti-psychotics for as long as I can remember. I intended to base Oliver's mental health journey off them. However, when I approached my family member to discuss their journey, they explained that their doctor has never made their diagnosis clear. With the information they gave me, I knew that it would be a challenge to make it clear to the viewer exactly what goes on in Oliver's brain. Oliver is on the spectrum of schizophrenia, which, for Oliver, began from a drug induced psychosis. Meanwhile, Oliver also suffers from OCD and undiagnosed autism. I want to

highlight how no two peoples' journey with mental illness is the same. My goal is for the viewer to learn about the different symptoms and become curious about mental illness. Through flashbacks, I want to make clear how Oliver was quite different before using LSD.

Although literary theory is new to me, I found the relation between structuralism and mental illness to tie into Oliver's journey. In Study Smarter's article, *Sociology of Mental Health*, it is expressed how mental health is historically, 'deeply stigmatized' but has been 'considerably demystified in recent years.'<sup>3</sup> They go on to explain, 'structuralists argue that there is a social pattern to mental illness.' (Smarter) Through the scenes displaying Oliver's OCD and the flashbacks to his pre-medicated past, I hope the viewer becomes curious to know what is to come for his character. Through this newfound research, I resonated with the quote, 'Reflection through research can provide a rich source of new understanding about the nature of creative practice for the practitioners themselves,' because in all aspects of craft and research, I value intersectionality.<sup>4</sup>

Through language, my goal was to show Oliver's character arc through the way he speaks in different periods of his life. In William Smethurst's *Writing for Television*, he explains, 'The characters in your play should be identifiable through their speech and the expressions they use.'<sup>5</sup> Prior to the LSD experience, Oliver's dialogue is quite like his younger brother Shea. He uses curse words and has a much more carefree persona. Due to his psychotic break, resulting in

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<sup>3</sup> Study Smarter, *Sociology of Mental Health*, (2018  
<<https://www.studysmarter.co.uk/explanations/social-studies/health/sociology-of-mental-health/#:~:text=The%20structuralist%20approach,mental%20health%20explain%20these%20patterns.>>

<sup>4</sup> "Reflection through research can provide a rich source of new understanding about the nature of creative practice for the practitioners themselves."

<sup>5</sup> William Smethurst, *Writing for Television*, (Oxford, How to Books Ltd., 2000) pp.60.

him being put on medication, he is overall quite reserved and only uses a curse word when he is late for work.

I believe I have been successful in making *Search and Rescue* a pilot that follows Aristotle's three-act structure and dives deep into the complexity of mental illness. However, there is room for improvement in terms of using language to differentiate Oliver's past and present. It was challenging to include all I had hoped for within the word count and I struggled to know when and where to make cuts. Overall, I believe I have developed my craft as a writer through research on structuralism I otherwise would not have done, and I pushed my creative boundaries by sticking to a structure while still incorporating enough humourous dialogue and dramatic need for my characters.

## Bibliography

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