



LIGHTS FILM SCHOOL

HOW STORY STRUCTURE CAN INSPIRE YOUR SCREENWRITING

Featuring 3 Case Studies to Help You Become a Better Filmmaker

**“To make a great film you need three things:
the script, the script, and the script.”**

- ALFRED HITCHCOCK

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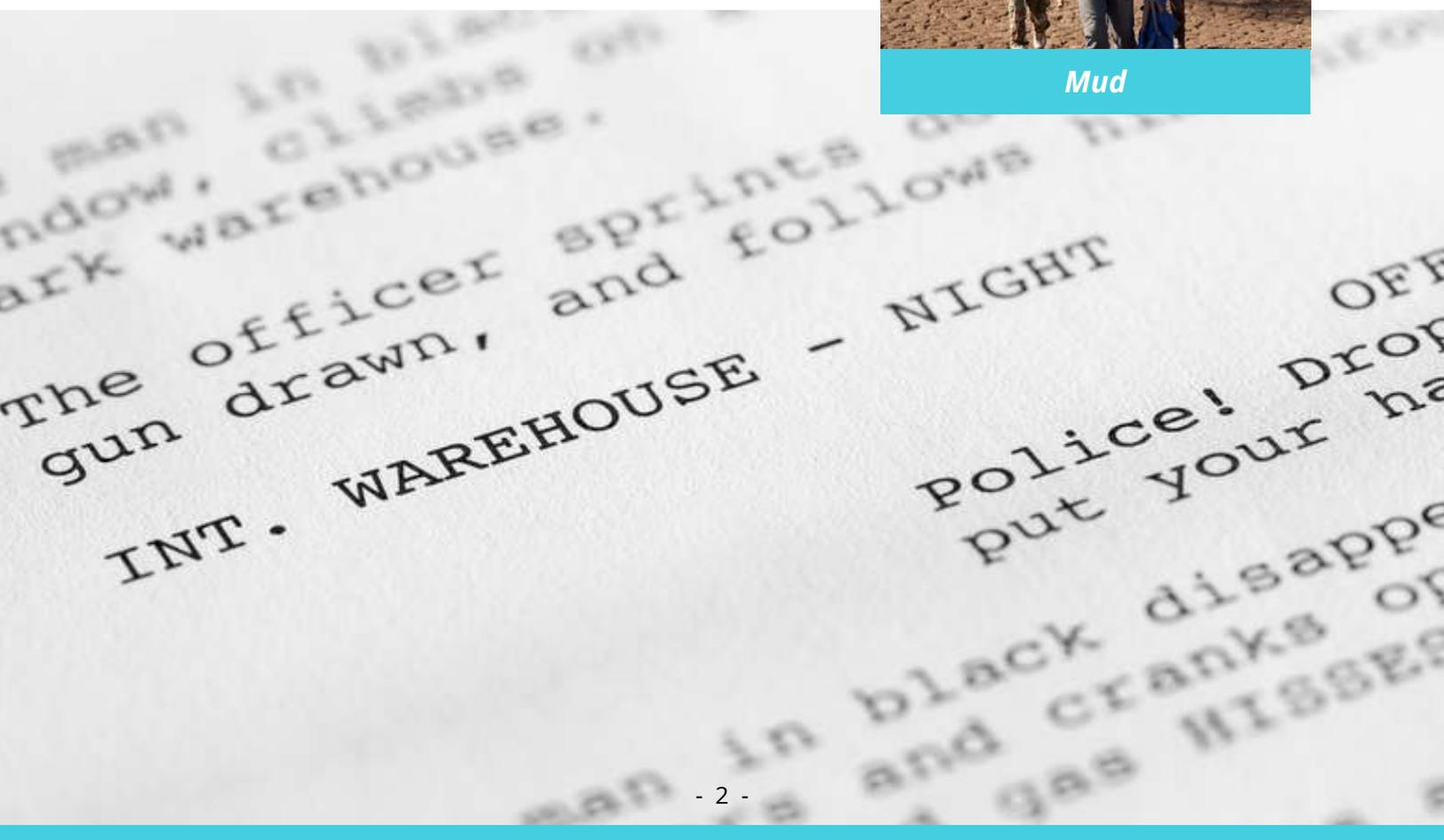
Primer



Open Water



Mud



WHY YOU SHOULD WATCH MOVIES ACTIVELY

Learning how to watch movies actively is one of the best investments you can make in yourself as a filmmaker.

When you watch movies not only for fun but also to learn, you're acknowledging that **every film is a lesson that rewards study**. You'll discover screenwriting principles you can apply to your own productions, insights into translating a film from script to screen, and examples of how to use the language of film to tell your own unique story!

The best way to build and benefit from a proactive viewing habit is to complete film breakdowns, which are essentially in-depth analyses of the movies you watch. To help you get started with this screenwriting exercise, we'll walk you through three film breakdowns. These case studies are fantastic features made on relatively small budgets; an inspiration for us indie filmmakers!

You'll want to **take notes during each screening**. Timestamp and record important events in each movie, especially with regards to story structure. For example, here's a page of notes we took during a screening of Denis Villeneuve's *Prisoners*:

The screenshot shows a document editor interface with a toolbar at the top. The main content area is divided into two columns. The left column contains a list of notes from 'Lights Film School' with timestamps and descriptions of film events. The right column contains a detailed breakdown of the film 'Prisoners', organized into sections: 'ACT I', 'plant (RV)', and a list of timestamped notes.

BREAKDOWN, "PRISONERS"

ACT I

- 00:00 - Winter woods, "Our father, who art in heaven...", Hugh Jackman. "Forgive us our trespasses..." Camera pulls back, revealing hunter. Shoots deer dead. REVEAL Hugh w/ young man.
- 01:06 - Driving in truck, raining. Hugh and young man. "Most important thing granddad told me - be ready." No grocery store access, no gas stations. People turn on each other. "I'm proud of you, son. Nice shot." Reveal, in context of narrative. Show deer.

plant (RV)

- 02:03 - Old RV turning onto street. Passes house, camera follows house. Shot on brake light, pan to another suburban house. RV drives down road, can't see driver. Leads us to Hugh's place (Remodeling truck). RV drives off.
- 02:51 - We're at Hugh's place. We see a cross hanging from mirror in car as mother and daughter exit house, "forgot the venison". Hugh, his son, daughter, and mother are going up the street. Nice family moment. Hugh shoots down son - can't buy car, not enough money. "Fortune to fix up grandpa's old apartment."
- 03:55 - We go to a much bigger house. Terrence Howard's wife answers door. "Happy Thanksgiving." We see daughters are friend. Son is named Russ. Domestic moment, we watch from the foyer.
- 04:45 - Terrence's wife, "Us veterinarians make lousy butchers." Hugh and Terrence set up table. Daughters go outside as adults prepare food. "Wear a hat!"
- 05:12 - Discuss feeling bad about shooting deer, Russ and Terrence's girl - "Gotta keep population of deer down." "Your dad say that too?" Kids play on RV, big kids pull them away from RV. MUSIC playing from RV. "Somebody's in there." They walk away. We watch them walk away from RV interior.

Although you're taking notes, keep up with the film! Don't pause, if you can help it. Pausing interrupts a film's flow and threatens to confuse your sense of its pacing.

Naturally, to complete a film breakdown, **you'll need three things: a copy of the film in question, a notebook for your notes, and a basic understanding of classical story structure.** You're on your own for the first two, but we'll teach you what you need to know about story structure over the next few pages. There's a lot of ground to cover, but if you stay with us, then you'll be ready to tackle a film breakdown - and pick up some screenwriting tips along the way.

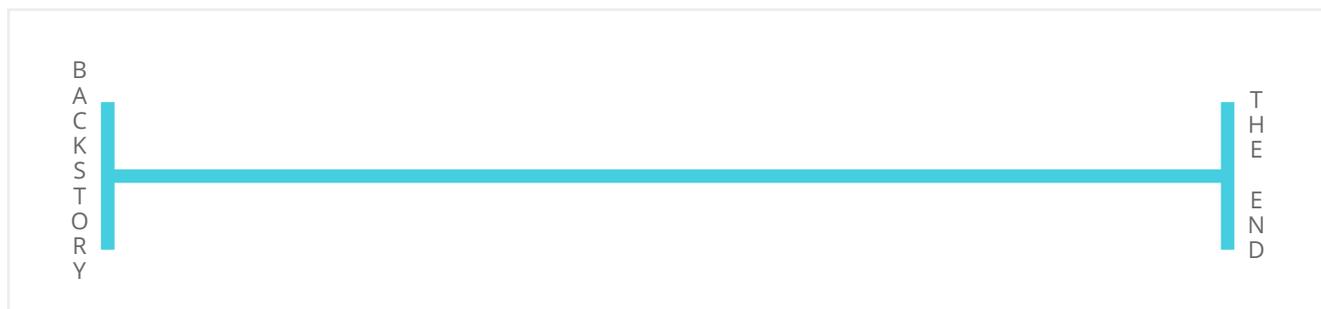
When you have time to invest in yourself as a filmmaker, carry on!



UNDERSTANDING STORY STRUCTURE

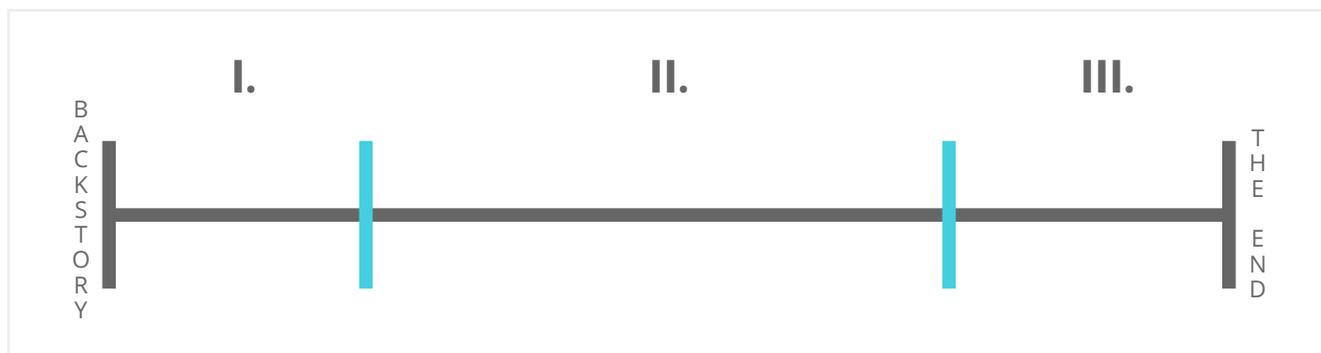
Generally speaking, screenwriting is tied to its form. While there are always exceptions to the rule, you will find that many scripts - from Hollywood blockbusters to art-house darlings - follow the principles established by the Greeks, when Western Dramatic Structure crystalized thousands of years ago.

Before you begin writing a script, you should know **the timeline** in which the story exists. Is it a matter of hours, days, weeks, or years? What and how much backstory does the story build on? Every film is essentially a timeline of events, represented over the course of roughly 90 to 120 pages, which is about 1.5 - 2 hours of screen time:

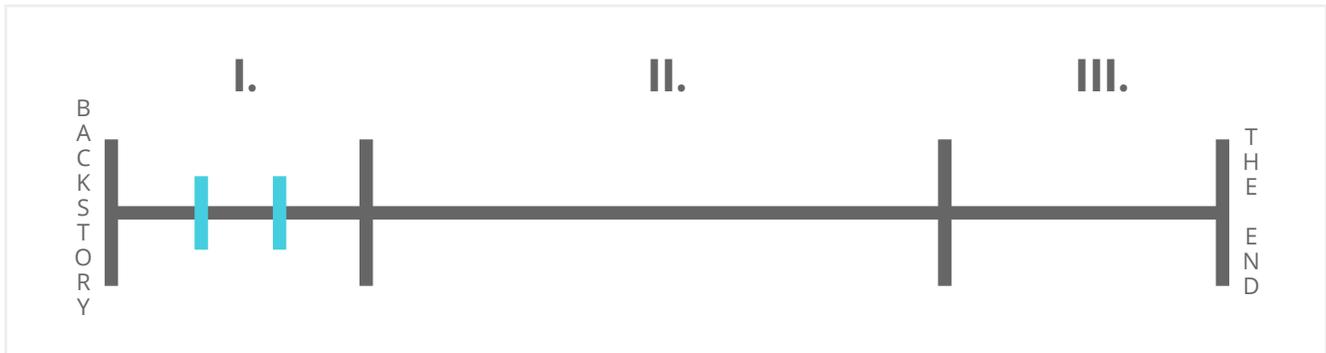


Once you have an idea of your story's timeline, you'll want to consider the hallmarks of Western Dramatic Structure: **act breaks!** Your script will be three acts long. Your first and third acts will run anywhere from 20 to 30 pages, while your second act will be twice as long, running anywhere from 40 to 60 pages. At the end of your first and second acts, you will insert two plot points.

Plot points are places where your protagonist is put in a position where he or she is forced to make a decision - a decision that changes the direction of the story:

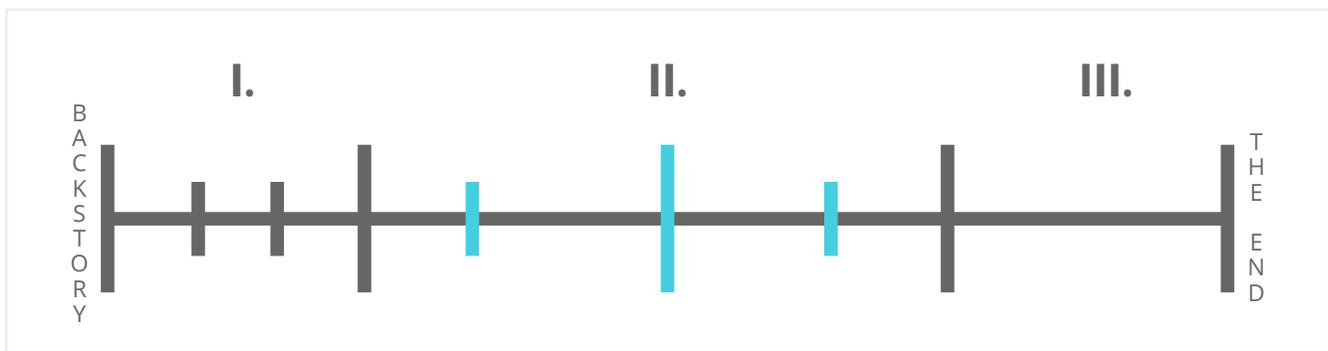


With your timeline, act breaks, and plot points in mind, you can turn to the particulars of fleshing out your story. There are further structural “beats” you’ll want to hit if you’re following Western Dramatic Structure. For example, in the first act, there’s the **inciting incident** and first pinch point. Briefly, your inciting incident is what takes your story out of the setup (also known as your character’s “ordinary world”) and transitions into the story you intend to tell. Your **first pinch point** is the instance where your protagonist is going to step into “the trap” that will force him or her to make a choice at the end of the first act/the first plot point:



After you’ve defined these key elements of your first act, you can move into the second act, which presents a host of new challenges. The second act is long, and it can quickly turn into a no-man’s land if you don’t have any idea where you’re going.

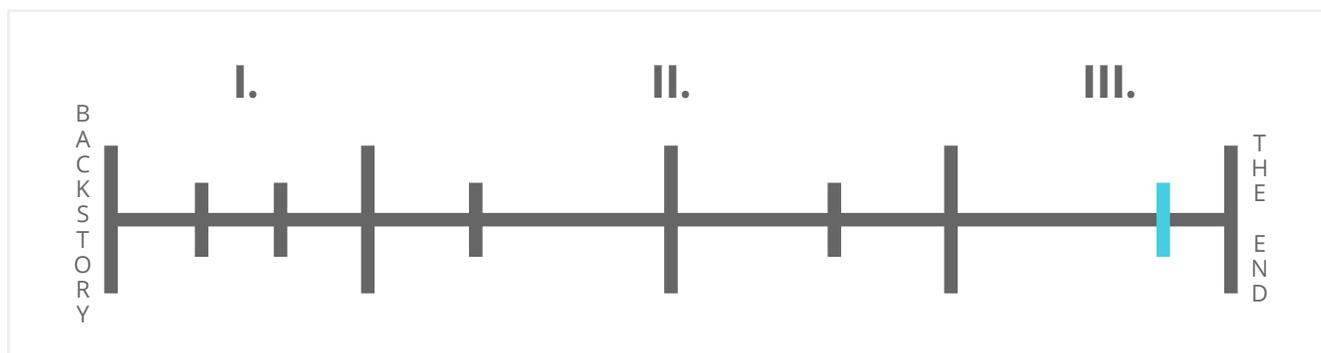
Act II is made more manageable by dividing it up into sections; specifically, the second pinch point, the mid-point, and the third pinch point. The second pinch point plants the seeds of what’s to come at the mid-point. The **mid-point** is the place in the story where your protagonist is going to experience an unexpected obstacle. Traditionally, this is where love will enter the picture or something else happens that escalates the stakes. The third pinch point is the place where your character is lulled into a complacency of sorts, or **a false sense of security**. This will make the second plot point an all-the-more devastating and crucial decision for your protagonist:



Lastly, you move into your third act. Third acts are sometimes neglected, often because the writer can see the end and wants to get there as quickly as possible. Don't do a disservice to your story by rushing the conclusion!

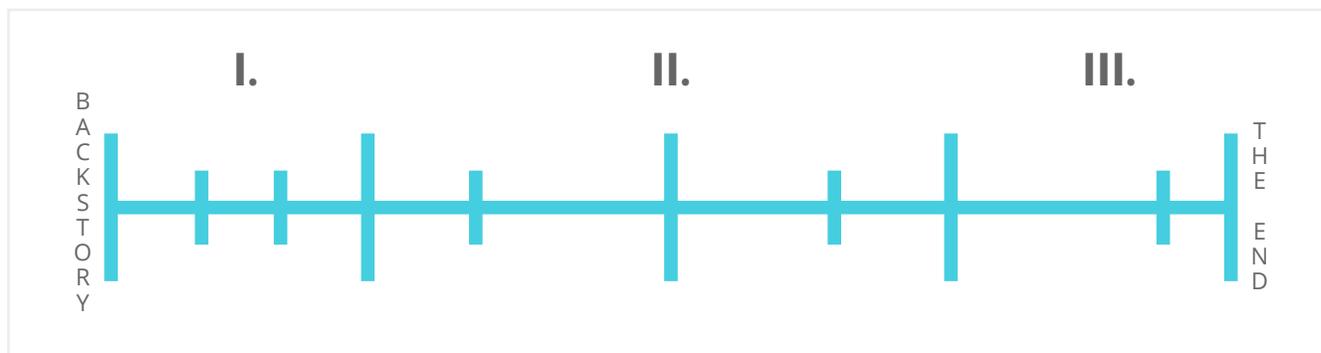
In your third act, one of the most crucial scenes in your movie will happen: the **climax**. This is where all of the suspense you've been building throughout your film comes to fruition - the final showdown, if you will. Generally speaking, the closer your climax is to your ending, the better. Leaving your audience with a crescendo - whether uplifting or tragic - is a hallmark of Western Dramatic Structure.

The small space that takes place between the climax and the ending is called the **denouement**, which is based on the French word for "untie." The denouement is a short section, often just a few pages, where your story unwinds and wraps itself up after the climax:



You undoubtedly will encounter countless versions of this model throughout your screenwriting education and career. There are many ways to think about classical story structure; this is just one of them to get you started.

Here's a quick look at the key structural points of a film that follows traditional Western Dramatic Structure, which we'll annotate soon:



ACT I: A Balancing Act

On paper, Act I is the most straight-forward of your three acts to write. This is because many writers feel that they have a firm grasp on the beginning of their story. We often have that superb opening sequence running through our minds long before we've mapped out everything else.

However, if you just breeze through your first act, then the rest of your story runs the risk of falling apart. Act I must give enough information to get your story rolling, while also withholding enough information to keep the mystery alive, and this balancing act usually requires a lot of forethought.

Again, **Act I runs anywhere from 20 to 30 pages.** In this short amount of time, you must do three very important things. To illustrate these things, we'll look at the character of Ben Braddock (Dustin Hoffman) in the iconic film *The Graduate*. [Check out the trailer:](#)



Thing One

First, you must introduce your protagonist and develop his or her “**ordinary world**”. His or her ordinary world shows who your character is and what day-to-day life is like. Here is where you show their flaws, their strengths, and hint at what they need to do to change by the end of the story.

In *The Graduate*, Ben is a fresh college graduate who seems apathetic toward life. He moves back in with his affluent and coddling parents. Ben is incredibly unhappy even though he has what many would consider the perfect life.

Thing Two

Secondly, you must throw your protagonist into your **inciting incident**. Your inciting incident often will happen on or around page 10. At this point, something happens that propels your protagonist into the story that you’re setting out to tell.

For Ben Braddock, the inciting incident is his first meeting with Mrs. Robinson. In the script, it is on page 10 where Ben and Mrs. Robinson meet, and she asks for a ride home. It is here that the audience begins to see that Mrs. Robinson is a seductress, and that she has Ben in her sights. This is where the story of *The Graduate* truly begins.

Thing Three

Thirdly, you must put your character into his or her **first pinch point**. Oftentimes, this will happen close to page 17 and will “set the trap” for your protagonist.

In *The Graduate*, we must look at the first plot point before identifying the first pinch point. The first plot point is when Mrs. Robinson throws herself at Ben and informs him that she has made herself “available” to him whenever he likes.

Remember, **plot points put your characters in situations where they are forced to make choices**. In *The Graduate*, the trap is set a little earlier in the act. The first pinch point takes place when Ben takes Mrs. Robinson home, and she - in a way - forces Ben to walk her into the house. Once Ben is inside, he has no chance of escaping without a confrontation of some sort. The trap has been set, which forces Ben into the first plot point.

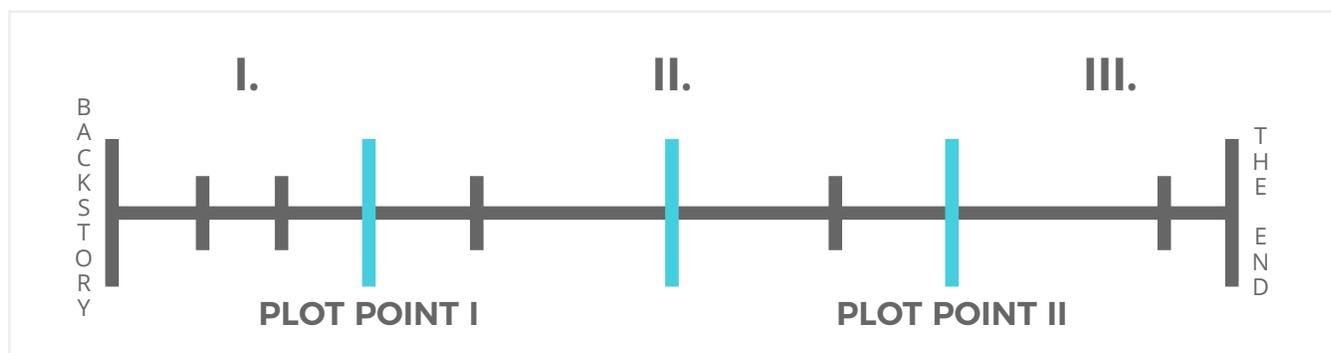
As we slingshot into Act II of *The Graduate*, we learn that Ben eventually takes Mrs. Robinson up on her “offer”, and it is this affair that propels the rest of the narrative. However, without properly setting up the narrative in Act I, the rest of the story wouldn’t have been possible. It’s a very precise balancing act.

Brevity is important in screenwriting, and nowhere is this more important than in your first act. You have a short amount of time to set up your story and hook the audience.

Plot Points

Plot Points, as already discussed, are places where your protagonist is put in a position where he or she is forced to make a decision that changes the direction of the story. These plot points are located at the ends of Acts I and II and help set up Acts II and III, respectively. Generally, you should know what these are for you before you begin writing.

Plot point I is the first main reversal that you’ll find in a classically well-made screenplay. It has many different names, including plot point I, turning point I, etc., and it comes in after the inciting incident, around page 20 - 30. It is the climax of your first act. This is the point where your protagonist is at a crossroads in his or her life and must choose a course of action. This decision is sometimes referred to as “**Plan A**” and is based on necessity. To illustrate:



For example, in *Dr. Strangelove*, General Jack Ripper goes mad and deploys his bomber wing to destroy the USSR. At the twenty-five minute mark, the US President meets with his advisors at the Pentagon to discuss the next course of action. They need to decide how to stop the planes before they trigger a nuclear holocaust.

Jumping ahead into the second act, **plot point II** is often the lowest point of the story for your protagonist. It is a hook that spins the action off in another direction. It is the point where “Plan A” must be abandoned because it is now impossible to achieve, or the goal has been obtained and the protagonist realizes that it is not what her or she truly wants.

This plot point is generally based on desire (in many romantic comedies, the stakes concern love). It features another prominent reversal and often comes in at around the 85 - 95 page mark. This is where all of the events of the second act come to a head, and all of the protagonist’s goals come tumbling down. Our character has traveled far, emotionally at least, and has overcome many personal flaws. Plot point II raises new questions, accents old ones, and can remind your protagonist of what he or she originally set out to do.

Much like the first plot point and the mid-point, plot point II should propel the story forward. In *Dr. Strangelove*, for example, General Ripper’s bombers have been recalled, but one plane didn’t receive the transmission; it is still on course, heading for a USSR missile complex.

To reiterate, knowing your plot points before you begin writing will help you structure and pace your story!

ACT II: No-Man’s Land

We’ve established our protagonist’s ordinary world. It’s been disrupted by the inciting incident, and the first pinch point has “set the trap” leading to plot point I and, naturally, the second act! The second act is the heart of your screenplay. This is where the ideas you built into your first act are put into action.

Said differently, if we think about a story as having a beginning, middle, and end - setup, conflict, and resolution - then this is where the majority of the conflict will play out.

Part of the reason Act II can be difficult to write is because **Act II is twice as long as your first and third acts**. Again, if we think about this portion as “conflict”,

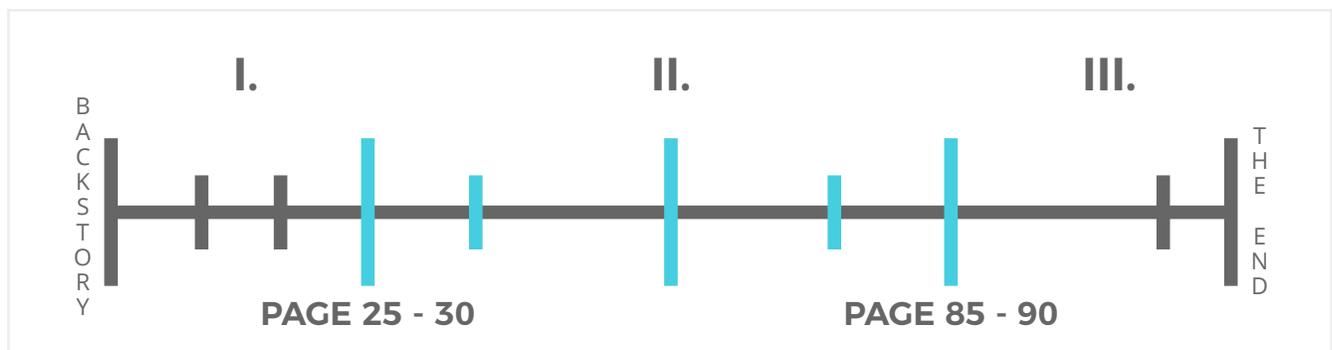
then this is where all of the trials and tribulations planted by the first act payoff. The plot point at the end of your first act has forced your protagonist to take action based on necessity; now, it's time to write the effects of that decision, while building toward your climax.

Structurally speaking, it is a large chunk of dramatic action with its own beginning, middle, and end, starting at the end of plot point 1 and ending at plot point 2.

Within the second act, there are seeds you should be planting to help your character move through his or her arc and reach the climax of the story, which is much easier to do if you know your ending ahead of time. Think about it as breaking the act into two parts, divided by your mid-point, which we'll discuss soon.

So about midway through the first portion of Act II - one quarter of the way through it - plant an **obstacle** for your character to overcome; something to test his or her plan, based on necessity. This will ultimately work in your favor. It will help keep a continuous rise of tension, keeping things interesting. For example, in this section, your protagonist might meet new allies and enemies - some of whom could change sides along the way - while he or she gets acclimated to the chosen path. It's worth noting that the protagonist often begins this journey at a very low point, so that there's room to build.

In the second portion of Act II - three quarters of the way through it - you should have something that gives your character **a false sense of security**. This way, the protagonist's abandonment of Plan A at the end of Act II will be dramatic and impactful. Plan A is abandoned because it is either A) impossible to accomplish, or B) not what was really wanted in the first place. So, before this revelation, introduce something that will give him or her a false sense of security. Always **keep the tension going! Conflict!**



Mid-Point

Your mid-point is exactly that - the middle of your story. In a feature length screenplay, it often will hit around the 45-60 page mark, depending on total length. At your mid-point, an unexpected obstacle needs to surface that attempts to get your protagonist back on track (Plan A). This obstacle can take many forms, and it's up to you to decide what it will be, but it needs to be something to get your protagonist to fully commit to Plan A. **This is where the protagonist needs to stop reacting and start acting.**

Sometimes this obstacle takes the form of what is known as a "pivotal" character, which makes sense because the mid-point is often referred to as the "pivotal" point. It is, oftentimes, a stranger that the protagonist meets who is an agent for change. Your protagonist's encounter with this person causes him or her to re-examine or re-evaluate his or her priorities, morals, values, strategy, and existence. Because of this tremendous power, the plot and eventual outcome of the movie can hinge on this character.

Wrapping Up

Remember, you should be continuously thinking about confrontation and conflict in Act II. Once you have clearly defined your characters and their needs, start thinking about obstacles that challenge those needs. If there were no obstacles in your character's way, their story would be rather boring, don't you think?

ACT III: The Final Countdown

Act III is, notoriously, the most rushed portion of a script. There's something about seeing the finish line that causes even the most experience writers to see how quickly they can get there.

However, Act III is also the place where all of your hard work pays off in a culmination - the climax - so it pays to take your time and give the audience an ending from which they'll walk away satisfied.

Like Act I, **Act III runs anywhere from 20 to 30 pages.** Act III is kickstarted by the

second plot point we discussed earlier, where your protagonist makes a decision to abandon his or her original plan and start off with a new one. Act III is also the act of resolution, so this decision must be made with the intent of resolving the major problems of your narrative.

Imagine that, when your character makes a choice at the end of Act II, a timer on a bomb has just been set and is slowly and steadily winding down. Though the bomb isn't literal (although depending on the film, it may be), this "ticking clock"-type suspense should be felt in your third act, whether you're writing an action film, a romantic comedy, or something in between. This ticking keeps ratcheting up the tension until the climax, when the problem is resolved.

The **climax** of the story is often the part of the movie that the audience is talking about as they walk out of the theater. It could be a car chase, an epic fight scene, the reunion of star-crossed lovers, the defeat of the antagonist, or even the death or failure of the protagonist. Something big needs to happen, whether it's pyrotechnic or more subtle. Your script's climax needs to resolve the story - for better or worse. Generally, the closer your climax is to the end of your film, the more effective it tends to be.

The Denouement

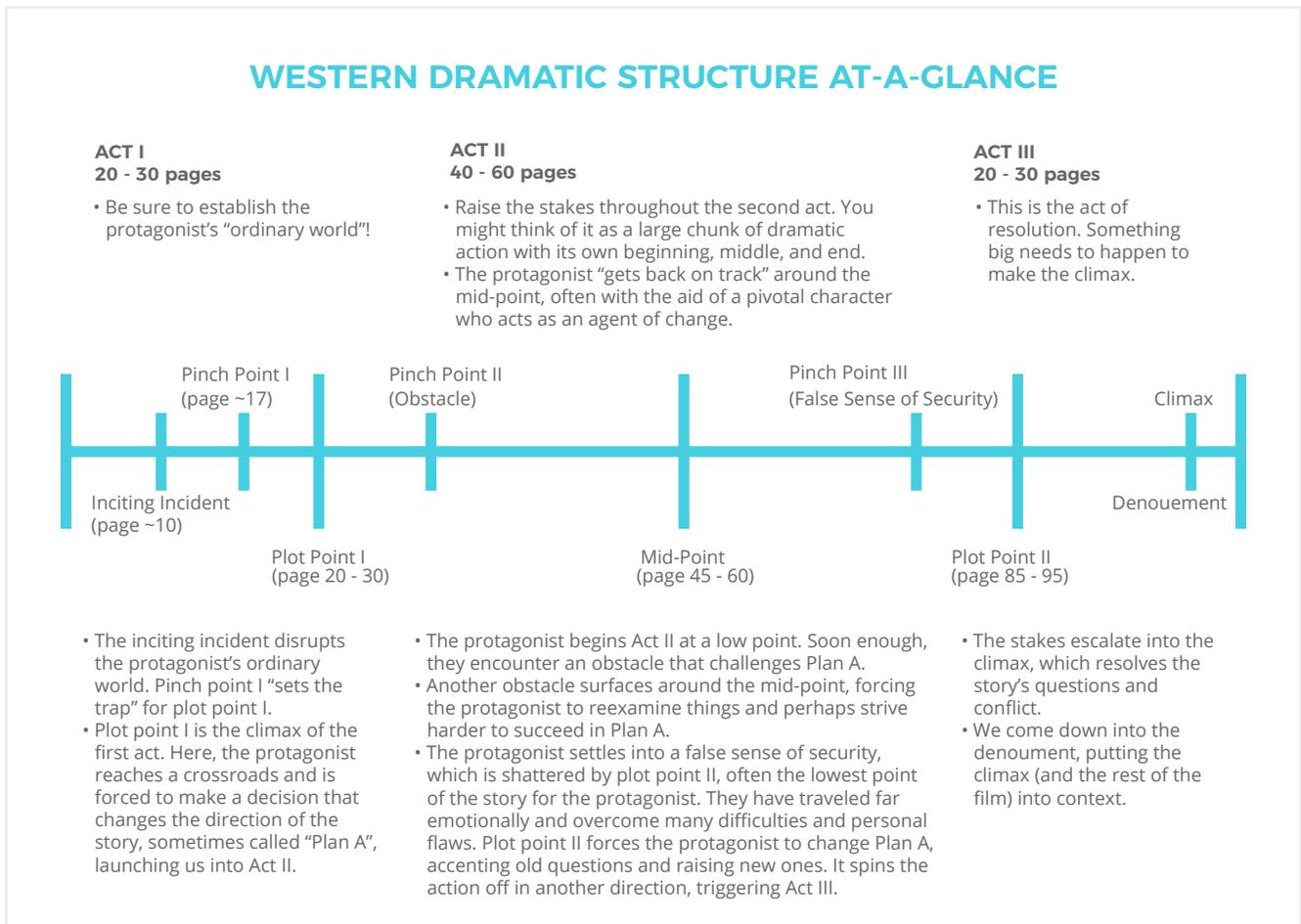
With that said, you still need to tie up the loose ends of your film with what is called a **denouement**.

The denouement takes place in the sliver of time between the climax of your film and the ending. This is the part of the movie where your hero walks into the sunset or we meet up with the couple after they're married, with a new baby. The denouement puts your climax, and ultimately your film, into context.

Taking your time to really let your suspense work for your story is something to practice in your own writing. Just because you're working in a "ticking clock" atmosphere doesn't mean that you need to rush things.

Think about your favorite movies. There's a good chance that most if not all of them - in one way or another - cause you to squirm in your seat for the last half hour. Harnessing this power and, ultimately, letting it release in your climax is a great way to approach writing a successful third act. Build and release!

That's a lot of information, so let's pull it into one representative image:



If this all feels a bit abstract, don't worry! We'll be putting theory into practice when we get to our film breakdowns, which will illustrate story structure firsthand.

The Plant and Payoff

As you do your film breakdowns, in addition to act breaks and the key structural points we just discussed, you'll want to keep track of "plants" and "payoffs". Plants and payoffs are those breadcrumbs that propel a story forward and shade it with meaning.

In a nutshell, a line of dialogue, a prop, a character, an image, a piece of information, or some combination of these elements is introduced, or "planted",

early in a film. Generally, it is repeated throughout the story until it assumes a new meaning at a key moment and “pays off”. So we have the sled in *Citizen Kane*, for example, or the whistle in *Prisoners* that saves Keller’s life.

Many films use the plant and payoff to resolve their stories, [as this video illustrates](#):



The device can be used in simpler ways, too, running the course of several scenes instead of the whole film. For example, in *Prisoners*, the RV is revealed to be the kidnapper’s vehicle within the first act.

Not every plant and payoff needs to bear the brunt of a film’s dramatic weight. Even so, whether it drives the climax or a more contained beat-to-beat progression, **a plant and payoff engages audiences, transforming them from passive viewers into active participants**. Like the journalist in *Citizen Kane*, we’re compelled to unravel the mystery of “rosebud”; we become detectives by proxy.

A good plant and payoff is both memorable and subtle. When it drives the climax, it must produce **a result that feels both inevitable and unexpected**. One of our favorite examples, profiled in the video above, comes from *The Sixth Sense* (spoiler alert) - Crowe was unknowingly dead the whole time he was working with

Cole! Inevitable? Yes, upon reexamination of the plants. Unexpected? Yes, because the plants did not give away too much. It's a beautiful balance of memorable and subtle that shocks the first time around and rewards repeat viewings.

Look for plants and payoffs as you complete your film breakdowns. The more you identify, the more you hone your sense of structure, the easier it will be to harness the power of this story engine in your own projects.

What to Look for When You Do a Film Breakdown

Let's recap, here. When you do your film breakdowns, you're looking for these things. Observe them all in your notes while you watch each film:

Act Breaks:

Act I Break

Act II Break

Act III Break

Key Structural Points:

Inciting Incident

Pinch Point I

Plot Point I

Obstacle

Mid-point

False Sense of Security

Plot Point II

Climax

Denouement

As well as:

Plants and Payoffs

Without further ado, you'll find your first film breakdown assignment on the next page, along with our answers.

FILM BREAKDOWN: *PRIMER*

In the words of film critic Mike D'Angelo, "Anybody who claims he fully understands what's going on in *Primer* after seeing it just once is either a savant or a liar."

In *Primer*, writer-director Shane Carruth applies his background in mathematics and software engineering to a byzantine story about the accidental discovery of time travel. He doesn't dilute the pervasive technical jargon or otherwise simplify the film's permutations. "I've watched it seven or eight times and I still don't totally know how it works," Chuck Klosterman writes in *Eating the Dinosaur*, "[but it is] the finest movie about time travel I've ever seen... because it's the most realistic":

"It's not that the time machine in *Primer* seems more authentic; it's that the time travelers themselves seem more believable. They talk and act (and think) like the kind of people who might accidentally figure out how to move through time, which is why it's the best depiction we have of the ethical quandaries that would emerge from such a discovery."



**"I haven't eaten
since later this afternoon."**

Primer | THINKFilm & IFC Films, 2004

The film's density is a part of its purpose - and its charm. *Primer* won both the Alfred P. Sloan Prize and Grand Jury Prize at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival, and today it's a cult classic.

It's also an inspiration to indie filmmakers. In addition to writing and directing, Carruth produced, edited, scored, and co-starred in *Primer*, ensuring complete creative control and helping to keep the budget to a mere \$7000. "The movie never looks cheap, because every shot looks as it must look," Ebert explains in his review. It's **a testament to the power of creating with the tools you have on hand**. *Primer* went on to make almost \$425,000, a 5968% Return on Investment.

[Let's watch the trailer](#) to kick things off:



Intrigued? Great! You'll want to set aside at least 2.5 hours for the breakdown: 1.5 to watch the film and take notes; 1 to gather your thoughts. If you're as befuddled as we were, you'll want an additional 1.5 hours for a second viewing! Of course, you'll need a copy of the film - pick it up on [Amazon](#), [iTunes](#), or a streaming service.

When you're ready, enjoy the show! We'll see you back here once you've watched the film and analyzed your notes for act breaks, key structural points, and plants and payoffs.

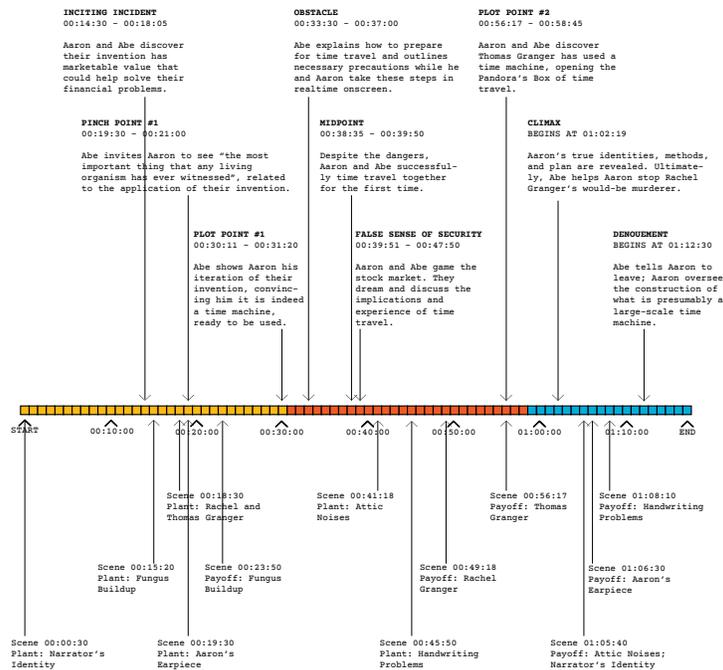
So what did you think?

Here at Lights Film School, we're fascinated by the film's relationship to time. How does one tell a multi-linear story using an inherently linear medium? Once the end credits rolled, we scoured the internet for analyses, poring over countless theories and elaborate diagrams to help make sense of what we'd just seen.

It took a while to realize that, for all its complexity, *Primer* plays out like a traditional thriller. We can identify its act breaks and structural points like we would with any other film inspired by Western Dramatic Structure.

So, how does one map a multi-linear story to a linear medium? By applying a tried-and-true narrative progression. This was a powerful moment of realization: even the most unconventional of plots can benefit from the dictates of structure; it keeps us grounded and engaged.

Here's our attempt at delineating that structure - [click through for a larger version!](#)

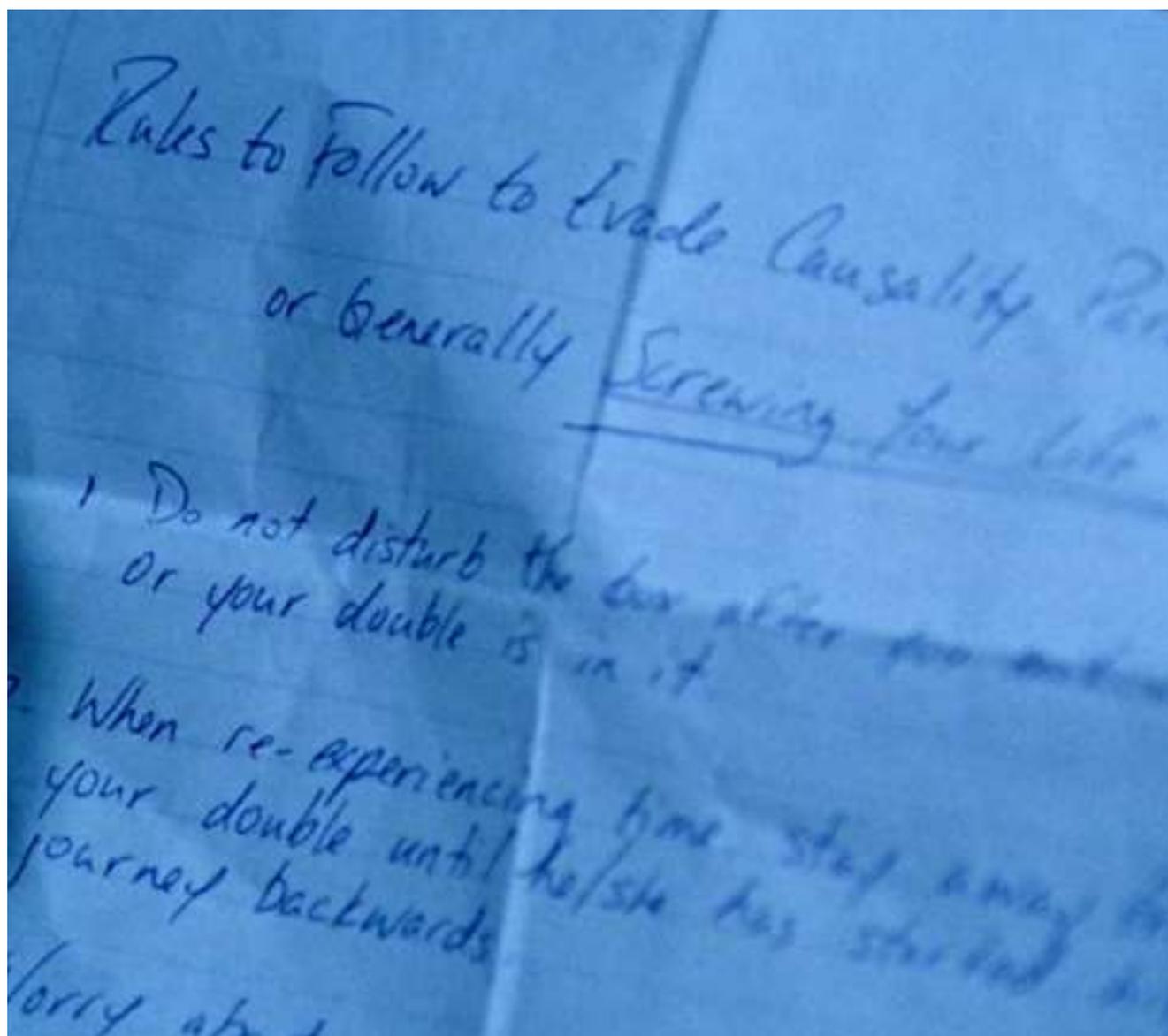


How do our breakdowns compare? Did we locate the First, Second, and Third Acts in roughly the same places? What about key structural points and plants and payoffs? If one of us is wrong, don't worry; we can always time travel back and fix it.

Maybe.

Actually, that's probably a terrible idea.

In any case, we'd love to hear how your breakdown went! Get the discussion going in the comments on [the eBook community page](#).



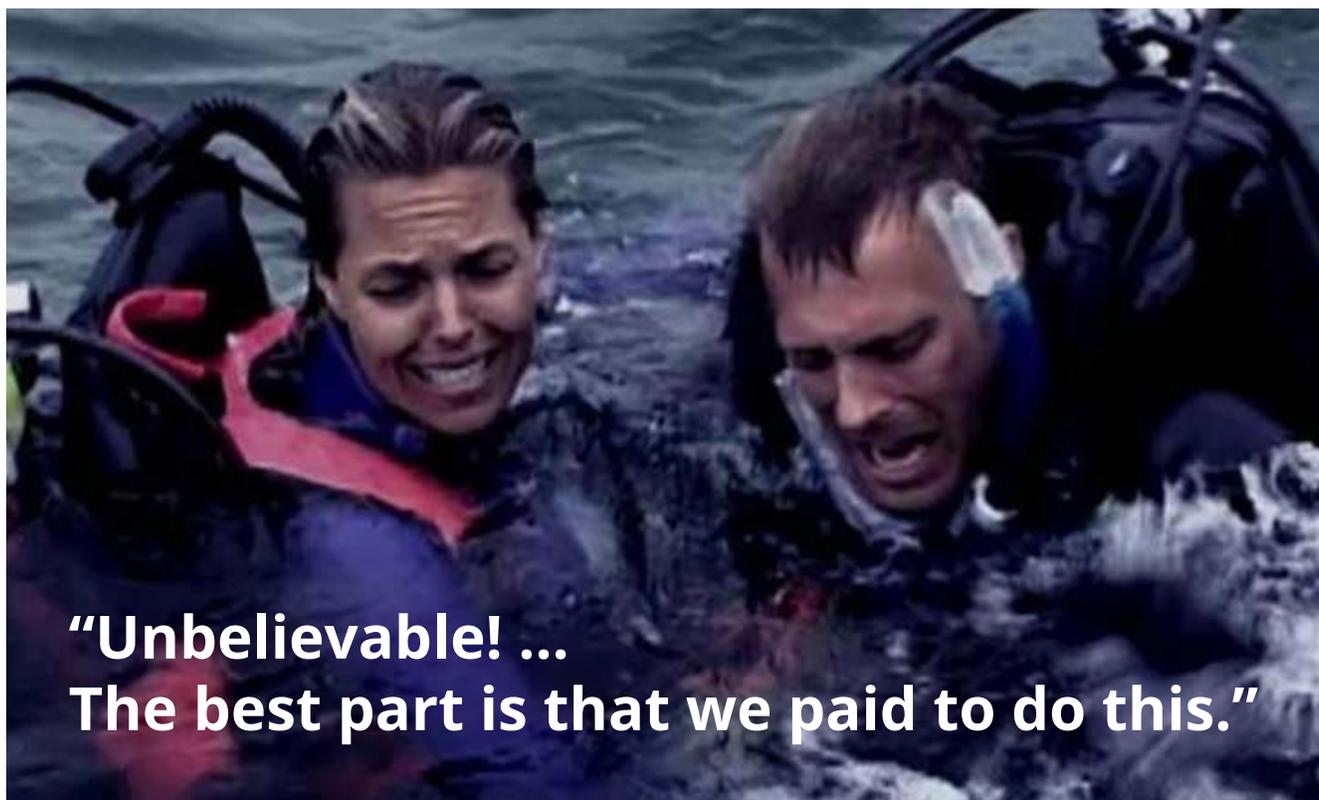
Primer | THINKFilm & IFC Films, 2004

FILM BREAKDOWN: *OPEN WATER*

Imagine floating in the ocean, forgotten by civilization while fighting the cold and thirst and - yes - sharks.

Open Water works on a visceral level. It preys on our childhood fear of being left behind and the adult counterpart of dying alone. A couple takes a break from their busy lives and scuba dives in the Atlantic, only to be abandoned at sea on account of an administrative error aboard their boat. They spend the next twenty-four hours drifting where the current takes them, waiting for rescue and struggling to survive. There's a directness to the narrative that belies its deeper themes; questions of humankind's purpose and place in the world.

Writer-director Chris Kentis, himself an avid scuba diver, based the story on real events. The film was made for some \$130,000, shot on weekends and holidays over three years, with real sharks. Chris and his wife, Laura Lau, also the film's producer, took 120 hours of footage from their DV cameras into the editing room and emerged with a 79 minute horror-thriller.



**“Unbelievable! ...
The best part is that we paid to do this.”**

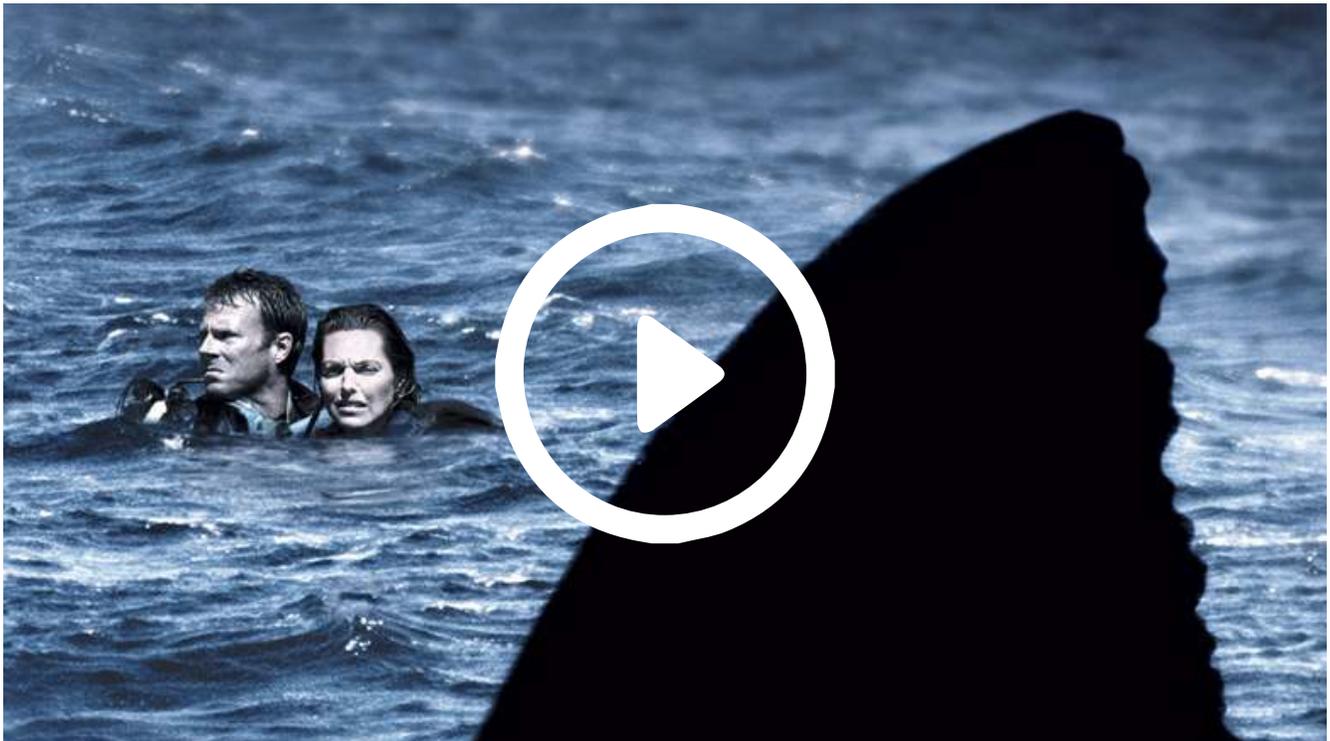
Open Water | Lionsgate, 2004

After its Sundance screening, *Open Water* was bought by Lions Gate Entertainment for \$2.5 million and went on to gross \$55 million worldwide.

Like *Primer*, it's a testament to the power of creating with the tools you have on hand; you don't need the latest and greatest gadgets and a star-studded cast to reach audiences and realize a massive Return on Investment.

Yes, such resources have their advantages, but **the secret of this shoestring success is in the popularity of its genre and simplicity of its telling.** Many people love scary movies. The DV camerawork lures us with its documentary aesthetic, compounding the horror of the film's events. It's a perfect match between style and subject matter.

Let's [check out the trailer](#):



Ready to get left behind by your dive boat? You'll want to set aside at least 2.5 hours for the breakdown: 1.5 to watch the film and take notes; 1 to gather your thoughts. Also track down a copy of the film - pick it up on [Amazon](#), [iTunes](#), or a streaming service.

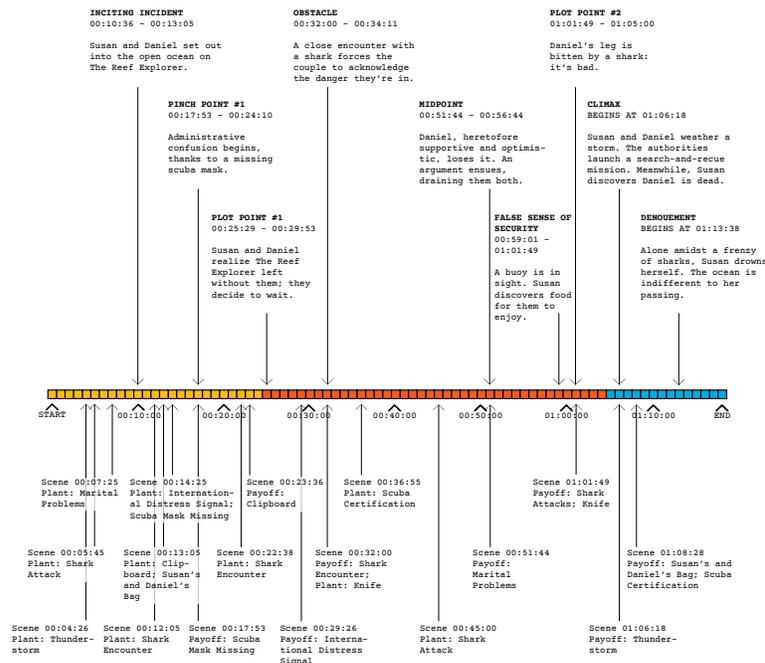
When you're ready, enjoy the show! We'll see you back here once you've watched the film and analyzed your notes for act breaks, key structural points, and plants and payoffs.

What are your thoughts?

We left feeling drained to empty, as hopeless as Susan right before her final decision. Not pleasant emotions, but undoubtedly the film's intention!

We were skeptical of the beginning - the dramatic angles and quick editing around the ordinary action of Susan and Daniel packing reminded us of a bad B-movie. Thankfully, we move past this quickly and are in the water by minute twenty-five, after which it becomes **a fascinating study in the dramatic escalation of stakes.**

We chart that escalation in our breakdown. [Click through for a larger version!](#)



- ACT I
- ACT II
- ACT III

OPEN WATER | 2004 | DIR. CHRIS KENTIS | TRT 79 MIN.

How do our breakdowns compare? Did we locate all three acts in roughly the same places? What about key structural points? What plants and payoffs did you pick up on? Sound off in the comments on [the eBook community page!](#)

FILM BREAKDOWN: *MUD*

Ellis and Neckbone, two boys growing up in De Witt, Arkansas, befriend Mud, a mysterious man living on a derelict boat on an island in the Mississippi River.

Mud's a fountain of home-brewed superstition, outlaw charm, and - in his way - youth, a beguiling combination that inspires the boys' help. They discover he's wanted for killing a man who hurt Juniper, the love of his life, and together they work in secret to rebuild the boat so that Mud and Juniper can sail away and live happily ever after.

Writer-Director Jeff Nichols' third feature film is a coming-of-age tale with a strong American undercurrent - think Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Flannery O'Connor's evocation of the South - that captures the textures of a vanishing world; in this case, life along the Mississippi River. Ellis and his parents live on a houseboat; his father sells fish to make ends meet. Neckbone's uncle goes diving for pearls.

And of course, there's Mud, living off the land and off the grid. His blinding love for Juniper sets an example for Ellis, whose parents are headed for divorce, while



Mud | Lionsgate and Roadside Attractions, 2012

he wades out into the murky waters of teenage dating. Can love be trusted? Does it last? *Mud* asks deep questions by leveraging its watertight story structure. The film is packed with plants and payoffs; it's a tremendously satisfying experience because all of the puzzle pieces fit together.

After premiering at the 2012 Cannes Film Festival, Lionsgate and Roadside Attractions recognized *Mud's* potential and acquired US distribution rights. It went on to make some \$21 million domestically, more than twice its \$10 million production budget - a sizable Return on Investment.

In short, ***Mud* is a successful independent film and masterclass in three act structure**, which is why we've chosen it for our final film breakdown here. [Get a glimpse in the trailer:](#)



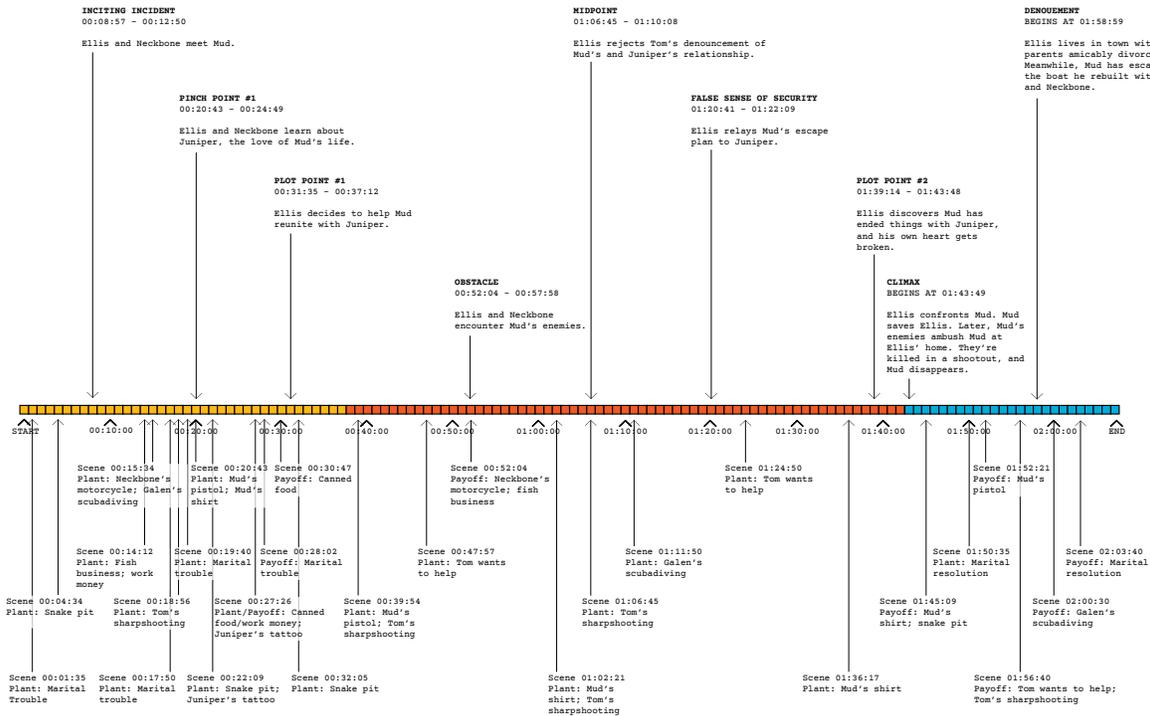
When you're ready to immerse yourself in the South, set aside roughly 3.5 hours to break down *Mud*: 2.5 to watch the film and take notes; 1 to gather your thoughts. Of course, you'll need a copy of the film! Browse [Amazon](#), [iTunes](#), or a streaming service.

As always, look out for act breaks, key structural points, and plants and payoffs. See you here after the show!

So what did you think?

We fell in love with Nichols' film - the distinct characters, the mythic landscapes, the sincere treatment of heartbreak, and, of course, the beauty of the story structure. There are no loose ends. Every element that gets introduced gets resolved, from details like Mud's pistol to plot necessities like the snake pit and Tom's sharpshooting abilities.

Take a look at our film breakdown. As always, [click through for a larger version!](#)



- ACT I
- ACT II
- ACT III

MUD | 2013 | DIR. JEFF NICHOLS | TRT 127 MIN.

How does our work compare to yours? We'd love to hear your take on act breaks, key structural points, and plants and payoffs in the comments on [the eBook community page!](#)

DENOUEMENT

If you've made it this far and completed the film breakdowns, then well done!

You've learned that analyzing a movie reveals screenwriting principles you can apply to your own productions, insights into translating a film from script to screen, and examples of how to use the language of film to tell your own unique story. Ultimately, every film is a lesson that rewards study, so watch *actively*.

The film breakdowns we create and share with our students and readers require an extraordinary amount of time and energy to produce - as has this mini masterclass in classical story structure, exclusively for our new Community Newsletter subscribers! We hope you enjoyed the learning as much as we enjoyed the teaching, and we encourage you to continue to practice this screenwriting exercise throughout your filmmaking journey.

Now grab your notebooks, pop some popcorn, and dim those lights! It's time for another film breakdown. Let us know how you're doing over on [the eBook community page!](#)

With love,

The Lights Film School Team

The Lights Film School Team

