

Five power-points in stories

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A powerful plot may sell a story even with weak characters. Plot is that valuable. In a recent survey, most movie-goers listed plot as the single most decisive element in what drew them to see the movie. In the highly competitive screenplay arena, good plots must be exceptional. In this writing tip I give clues to strategic points that make powerful plots.

Power point 1: Opening that engages viewer interest

Your screenplay is first going to be read. If you don't quickly get the reader's interest, the script may be quickly scanned and set aside. So the first important point is the first few pages. One of two things must happen during the first few pages. The basic storyline must be so powerful that it immediately draws the reader in, or there has to be a hook.

How do you draw the reader in? By immersing him in gripping drama on the first page. Many writers open with a life and death situation. Most people want to know how the life and death drama turns out, so the reader is pulled into the story. Life and death were hinted at in *Fried Green Tomatoes* with the car being lifted from the river. Every story can't open with life and death, but most stories can open with drama that mesmerizes by entering right into the basic conflict that is at the heart of the story. On the other hand, if the story opens with scene after scene of characterization and background, reader and audience involvement may be minimal. People need to be fascinated by something. We can relate to interesting characters and developing situations if they are really that good.

Cheap and dirty: the hook

Hooks are a device to snag the audience until they can get into the story. (The best hooks are just getting right to the drama.) On the series, *Quantum Leap*, Sam Beckett landed in an unknown body, time, and place, putting him in a crisis situation. This occurred at the end of the weekly program, making us tune in the following week to see what happens. The next week the same hook opened the program, immediately snagging viewer interest. However, the immediate situation Sam found himself in usually had nothing to do with the central conflict of the story. This is a perfect example of a hook as a device to hold the viewer until he is into the story.

Mystery is another excellent device for keeping people involved in the story. In *Quantum Leap*, when Sam entered a new body he had nothing but questions: who am I, where am I, why am I here, who are these people, what am I doing? How am I going to catch that guy swinging toward me on a trapeze? These mysteries slowly unraveled through the entire story. It isn't difficult to put mystery in a story, and even if the basic story isn't a mystery, it can be worked in as a subplot, as in *Fried Green Tomatoes*.

Power-point 2: Using Crisis To Develop Crucial Scenes

How much motivation should it take to get characters to decide to do something? Do-gooders, who have to rectify every wrong they see, usually aren't likable characters. On the other hand, the lazy duff who requires dynamite to move him is not that likable either, except in a comic sort of way. Should people be

boxed into a corner so the right decision is the only one? How does this make the character look if he can't stand up for what he wants unless he is cornered? Shallow? From ten to thirty minutes into a story the main character has to make a decision to do something about "the problem" to make the story work, so do you make him a do-gooder or a duffer, or something in between? The answer lies in how your character responds to crisis and whether he is reactive or proactive.

Reactive people generally don't make good protagonists. Something happens so they finally do something. They watch the world happen until finally the earth moves and they have to make a decision which way to go. For example, Roger Milquetoast sees a teen accosted on the street by a drug dealer. He ignores it. Later he hears about drug killings. He ignores it. His children are approached by dealers to buy drugs. He tells them to ignore them. His son becomes an addict. He sends his son to a rehab program and ignores the dealers. The dealers start drive by shootings. He ignores it. They start shooting out his windows, almost killing his infant daughter. Finally he decides he has had enough and joins a neighborhood watch program.

Proactive people, on the other hand, decide much earlier to resolve a problem. They don't go looking for problems to correct, but when they see one, something within them makes them want to resolve the problem. For example, Roger Truehart sees a teen accosted on the street and calls the police. When his children are approached by drug dealers, he starts the neighborhood watch program and tries to recruit Roger Milquetoast. Proactive characters are much more interesting to watch because they make things happen.

Movies aren't about the mundane things in life. They are about moments in life when people change, or make changes. Reactive characters are cornered and forced to do something. Proactive characters come face to face with an obstacle and decide to do something about it. Whichever way it happens, these are life changing situations, and are called "crisis." A crisis is a time when people have to make a decision. They can't just ignore the problem, they have to decide how they will deal with it. This is a turning point in the story. For a character, it's a "decision point." For the audience, it's the drama that propels the action into part two.

Part of being able to draw poignant scenes with decision points and turning points is understanding the role of a crisis. Real people do drift through life, often in tune with themselves, and make effective decisions. True to life, yes, but dramatic, no. Just as often other people are thrown into a crisis because they either made a wrong decision, or they want something that is out of reach. The crisis comes because it is not within them to continue going in the direction they were going. They want something so badly they commit their entire being to reaching it.

Look at your protagonist (and antagonist) at the end of part one. Is he in crisis, or could he just as easily continue the same as he was? If he's not in crisis, it's doubtful the story is going to have any drama, any tension, any climax.

Usually the crisis is precipitated by the bad guy. He wants something in direct opposition to the good guy. He may also be in crisis because the good guy is in his way. Two people who want something so badly that their entire being is dedicated to it makes good action. It doesn't have to be heavy drama. It can

be humorous, light, good escapism. Sports teams do it every day. But the characters have to want something.

Power point 3: Mounting tension through three obstacles

The crisis is just the beginning. The next power point in a story is the main section of the story between the crisis and climax. If this part drags it puts people to sleep. Typically the protagonist is going to face about three obstacles, each one more difficult, the tension mounting with each one, as he struggles to attain his goal. Maybe he's struggling for the love of a woman, but first he doesn't have enough money, so he prints some. Second, she doesn't like his kind so he polishes his image. And third she decides he is too old for her, unlike the young rich guy who is courting her, so he proves youth is a state of mind.

In another story, the protagonist needs to make a good grade so he can graduate. First, the antagonist, who wants to see him fail, throws a party to use his study time. He studies all night. Second, the antagonist gives him a flat tire so he can't make it to school for an important exam. He somehow makes it. Third, the antagonist reports him to the principal as having broken into the locker room and vandalized the place, so the police are waiting at school for him. These things are the meat of part two, the main part of the story. The crisis begins the struggle and conflict builds tension as the hero faces obstacle after obstacle.

Why are there three obstacles? To make the story perfectly long enough? Three is kind of a magic number. But compare it to the baseball season. At the beginning of the season there are a couple of teams who won the previous season. Can they do it again? They both lost some of their best players - maybe they're no good. First, they both play some teams. They win. They're not duds. Second, they play really tough teams - we can see they are strong contenders. Third, by the end of the season they have trounced all the other teams and have won the league pennants. So after three great hurdles, we now know that we have two opponents who are worth watching. They are worthy opponents and well matched. But without the lead-in of three previous obstacles, we would just be watching another battle that could just as well be at the beginning of the season - really tame stuff. Give your protagonist and antagonist the lead-in of three obstacles that prove what they are made of.

Power point 4: Climactic challenge that seems insurmountable

But the three obstacles aren't the true test of the protagonist. A fourth obstacle suddenly appears on the horizon like a monster from Hell, bringing a major crisis. The bad guy unleashes the ultimate weapon and the good guy appears doomed - he may as well lie down and die. In fact, for a moment he may give up. But then he finds his inner strength and fights for his life with every ounce of courage and determination. For example, the man trying to win the woman, after having fought three obstacles, now finds she is already married. All is lost. But wait, he decides to find out more and discovers she hates the guy but he has her tied up in legal knots. The good guy has a better legal strategist and they manage to outwit the man she hates.

Or the guy who needed to graduate. He faced his three obstacles, managed to convince the police he couldn't have done the vandalism, and returned to school. Alas and alack, the principal, who hates his guts because he caused so many

problems during the year, won't let him in because he is late, so he can't take the tests. He collapses on the school steps, defeated. All is lost. But wait, he remembers evidence that would place the principal's son at the scene of the crime - the same son who had gotten him in trouble all year. He confronts the principal, who confronts his guilty son, and then allows him to take the tests.

This third crisis drives the story into the climax. The climax is the final confrontation where the tension is at its peak. It's the final battle or the final test. By making sure the character is in crisis, the drama has a lot of captivating power.

Power-point 5: Satisfying resolution

The final power-point is the ending, called the "resolution." Resolution means all the conflicts are resolved and there are no loose ends. This is a power-point because it will make the viewer tell others to watch the movie. If the film wasn't satisfying, he will tell others to avoid it. People love happy endings. Why? Not because we all live with our head in the clouds, but because happy endings tell us there is a solution to our problems. Life is not just endless torture, there is hope, and life is after all, worth living. And we identify with the main characters - we don't want to leave the theater depressed.