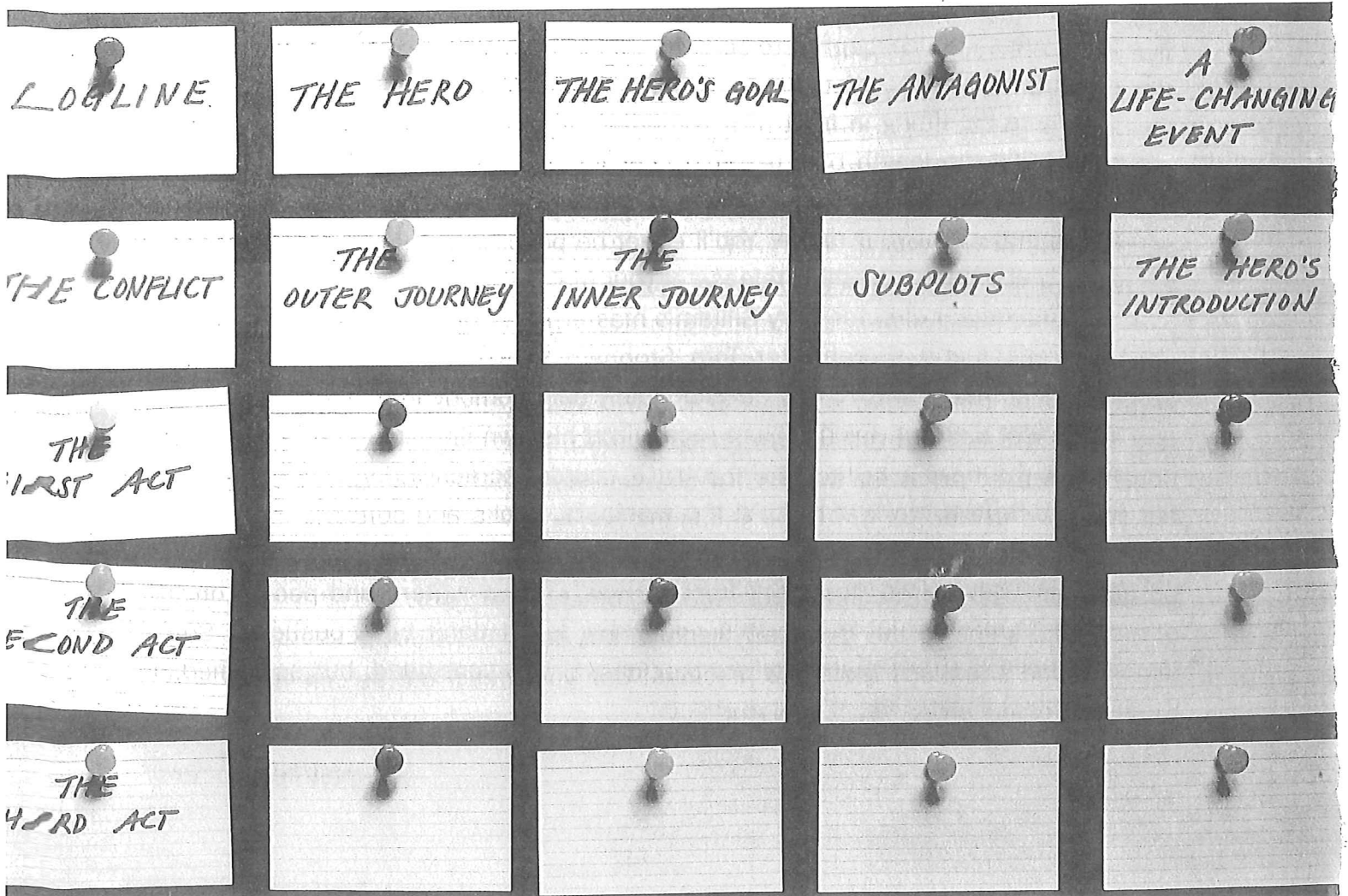
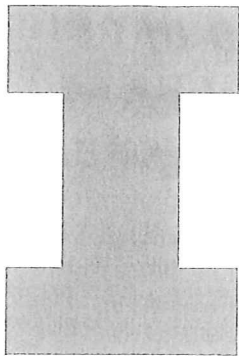


It only takes a deck of index cards and a ballpoint pen TO START YOUR SCREENPLAY

WRITING WITH A FULL DECK





IF YOU'RE ANYTHING LIKE ME, you occasionally ruin an otherwise wonderful weekend with a round of golf. If you've broken a few putters over your knee (also like me), you're probably not surprised to learn that golfers spend over \$3 billion a year attempting to better their game. The irony is that despite space-age advances in golf technology, average golf scores over the last 20 years have remained static.

It may not seem like golfers and screenwriters have much in common, but

technology has changed the way both groups play their respective games. Computers have long replaced typewriters, and screenwriting software like Final Draft has eliminated formatting mistakes. But have movies become noticeably better?

While I'm a big fan of story development software such as Power Structure and John Truby's Blockbuster, there are times when simple low-tech solutions work just as well. This is especially true when it comes to structuring your screenplay.

In this exercise, you're going to take a stack of 50 normal-sized index cards and plan an entire screenplay. It's cheap (you can buy these for under \$1), it's easy (all you need is a pen) and it's portable (wrap a rubber band around them and you can write anywhere).

You are going to create 40 scene cards and 10 summary cards. While I've presented these cards in a certain numerical order, you don't have to follow them in sequence. Complete the cards in the order that makes the most sense to you. Use one side of the card for your own notes and the other to complete the exercise.

Card #1: Logline

THE LOGLINE IS A SHORT DESCRIPTION of your screenplay. It's usually 25 to 50 words in one or two lines. A logline describes the protagonist and identifies his or her goals and the obstacles to those goals. The logline also explains the stakes involved and gives the audience a reason to care. It may also suggest the film's genre. That's a lot in just one or two lines. Here are some examples:

Dr. Malcolm Crowe, a child psychologist, tries to help one of his troubled patients, a young boy named Cole, who believes he sees dead people. —*The Sixth Sense*

Maria, a Colombian teenager beset by poverty and pregnancy, travels to the United States as a drug mule and hopes for a better life. —*Maria Full of Grace*

Card #2: The Hero

IN THIS CARD, IDENTIFY THE protagonist or hero of your screenplay. Describe your hero's physical characteristics, but also give us a reason why we should care about this person. What is his or her strength? Does he or she have a tragic flaw? Successful characters in a screenplay demand empathy from the audience. Does yours? We care about Cool Hand Luke, a lifelong troublemaker, because he's funny and not afraid to stand up to the sadistic prison guards. We care about Miles, the sad sack in *Sideways*, because most of us have felt like complete failures at one time in our life.

Card #3: The Hero's Goal

WHAT DRIVES YOUR HERO? In the case of *Superman*, he needs to save the world from destruction. While most of us appreciate that goal, we can't relate to it much. But we can certainly relate to Superman's inability to tell Lois Lane exactly how he feels about her. We want to see Superman end up with Lois as much as we want to see him defeat Lex Luthor.

The goal of your hero must be so important that we completely understand why he or she will put up with humiliation (*Working Girl*), risk injury or death (*Saving Private Ryan*) or even put the safety of his or her own children at risk (*To Kill a Mockingbird*). On this card, write down your hero's main goal and why it is so important.

Card #4: The Antagonist

A GREAT MOVIE CAN OFTEN be described as a catastrophe waiting to happen; the antagonist drives your hero toward that catastrophe. Remember that the tougher the antagonist, the more the audience will applaud the hero for achieving his or her goal. *Rocky* wouldn't have been the same if Apollo Creed weighed 110 pounds. Antagonists are usually, but not always, real characters who want to—and can—keep your hero from achieving his or her goal. Cal in *Titanic* and the Nixon administration in *All The President's Men* are two very different examples of cinematic antagonists. The best antagonists, of course, have a touch of human condition to them (we can forgive Lord Farquaad slightly in *Shrek* because of his short stature).

YOU ARE GOING TO CREATE 40 SCENE CARDS AND 10 SUMMARY CARDS. While I've presented these cards in a certain numerical order, you don't have to follow them in sequence. Complete the cards in the order that makes the most sense to you. Use one side of the card for your own notes and the other to complete the exercise.

Card #5: A Life-Changing Event

FEW MOVIES START WITH THE hero already in pursuit of his or her goal. Usually the hero is living his or her normal life and then—*bam!*—something happens to shake it up. An Olympic ice skater breaks his leg; an engaged woman meets a different man—or woman—who touches her beyond her wildest dreams; a meek accountant witnesses a murder on his way home from work. These kinds of life-changing events are what set your hero into action to achieve his or her goal. Often referred to as the first plot point, this event usually occurs about 10 minutes or 10 percent of the way into the film. Write down this event and how it changes your hero's life.

Card #6: The Conflict

DESCRIBE THE CONFLICT OR CONFLICTS between your protagonist and antagonist. What are the stakes? Often your hero will encounter several obstacles on the way to his or her goal. Each obstacle gets bigger and bigger until it seems impossible. In *Gladiator*, Maximus must continually fight stronger and tougher opponents.

THESE 50 CARDS may not represent a completed script, but they are a great starting point for your screenplay or treatment—and can help you better visualize the finished product. After all, no one wants to face “Fade In” alone.

Card #7: The Outer Journey

YOUR HERO OFTEN TAKES TWO JOURNEYS: The first journey is “the outer journey,” which is comprised of physical obstacles your hero must overcome to reach his or her goal. Almost every road movie is built around a series of physical obstacles. In *Planes, Trains & Automobiles*, Neal tries every way possible to get home for Thanksgiving while dealing with the buffoon Del. Describe the outer journey your character is taking.

Card #8: The Inner Journey

THE SECOND JOURNEY, THE INNER JOURNEY, is often more important. Again, in *Planes, Trains & Automobiles*, Neal wants to get home to his middle-class suburban family. But during the film, he changes to be more accepting and generous toward someone very different from him. In *Erin Brockovich*, helping to solve a corporate crime takes Erin on an inner journey that raises her self-esteem and pride. Describe your hero’s inner journey.

Card #9: Subplots

RARELY DOES A SCREENPLAY HAVE JUST one story involving your hero and antagonist. Create subplots to interest the audience and show more about your hero, making sure they reflect the overall theme of your film. While *Star Wars* is all about Luke destroying the Death Star, there are plenty of subplots involving Leia, Han Solo, the droids and Obi-Wan that keep the story moving forward and interesting.

Card #10: The Hero’s Introduction

THE FIRST TIME WE MEET YOUR HERO sets the stage for the entire movie. The opening scene of *Saving Private Ryan* is one of the most famous: We see Captain John Miller survive a brutal battle and are drawn into his courage and leadership. The opening scene should illuminate your hero through action, dialogue and other characters. You don’t have to spill secrets right away, but get the audience interested in your hero’s story.

SCENE CARDS

The next 40 cards are your scene cards. Collectively, they will make up your entire script. I suggest you use the lined side of your cards to write notes, make diagrams and summarize the entire scene. On the other side—the blank side—write a standard slugline and a short one- or two-sentence description of the scene.

Cards #11 - #20: The First Act

IN THESE 10 SCENE CARDS, you are going to prepare the first act of your screenplay. The first act confronts your hero with a dramatic problem or crisis. You should certainly be creative in how you write the first act, but it should accomplish each of the following tasks:

1. Introduce your hero. In most instances, the hero or protagonist is introduced in the first few scenes.

2. Introduce your antagonist. You can introduce your bad guy in his own separate scene, before he starts to confront your hero. Perhaps your bad guy is a schoolyard bully and his opening scene shows him taking some other kid’s lunch money. Perhaps she is a vicious boss and you show her berating her assistant for the umpteenth time before lunch.

3. Introduce almost all minor and secondary characters.

4. Show the life-changing event. In one of the early scenes in *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, a shy Loretta Lynn is encouraged to sing at a country dance. The positive response encourages her to sing more and changes her life.

5. Present your audience with a crisis. Show the audience what the stakes are—even if it’s a comedy. In *Wedding Crashers*, dedicated carousers John and Jeremy find their friendship and lifestyle tested when one of them actually falls for a girl.

Cards #21 - #40: The Second Act

THESE 20 CARDS ARE THE RAPIDS IN THE RIVER. They are the falling boulders on your climb up the mountain. The second act is full of complications that get harder and harder. There are a few key components of your second act:

1. Increase the obstacles. First, blow up the car. Second, blow up the building. Third, put the entire city in harm’s way.

2. Include a scene that truly tests your hero. This scene is often midway through your movie and is called “the point of no return.” Rose must choose between Jack and Cal in *Titanic*; midway through the film she invites Jack to sketch her, thus committing herself to him.

3. After the “point of no return,” conflicts between the protagonist and antagonist escalate rapidly.

4. The second act is also where subplots can develop that add interest and dimension to your story.

Card #41 - #50: The Third Act

THE LAST 10 CARDS COMPRISE THE THIRD ACT. In the third act, conflicts start to resolve. There may still be battles, but we know our hero will reach his or her goal. Other third act scenes include:

1. A look back. The hero often looks back at his life before his journey to wonder “what if,” but inevitably continues forward.

2. A final scene may show that though the hero doesn’t have a happy ending to his outer journey, his inner journey was completed. In *Shakespeare in Love*, Viola must leave Will behind. But in doing so, she leaves the stifling rules of England behind for a new life.

3. The final scene. While perhaps done too often, the final scene often takes place after the journey is completed. We see our hero happy and satisfied in his or her new life.

These 50 cards may not represent a completed script, but they are a great starting point for your screenplay or treatment—and can help you better visualize the finished product. After all, no one wants to face “Fade In” alone. **MM**