

A summary of the book

# Save The Cat

The last book on screenwriting that you'll ever need

By Blake Snyder

*Summary by Kim Hartman*

**SAVE THE CAT!**

The Last Book On Screenwriting You'll Ever Need!



**BLAKE SNYDER**

This is a summary of what I think is the most important and insightful parts of the book. I can't speak for anyone else and I strongly recommend you to read the book in order to fully grasp the concepts written here. My notes should only be seen as an addition that can be used to refresh your memory after you've read the book. Use the words in this summary as anchors to remember the vitals parts of the book.

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## Connect

Get in touch!



[howdy@kimhartman.se](mailto:howdy@kimhartman.se)



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## Description from amazon

This ultimate insider's guide reveals the secrets that none dare admit, told by a show biz veteran who's proven that you can sell your script if you can save the cat!

## 1. The Logline

A catchy logline and a killer title will get you noticed. A well-structured screenplay will keep you in the game, and knowing how to fix your script — and any other script you may be presented with — will get you a career.

The logline is your story's code, its DNA, the one constant that has to be true. A good logline, in addition to pulling you in, has to offer the promise of more. It must satisfy four basic elements to be effective:

1. **Irony.** It must be in some way ironic and emotionally involving — a dramatic situation that is like an itch you have to scratch.
2. **A compelling mental picture.** It must bloom in your mind when you hear it. A whole movie must be implied, often including a time frame.
3. **Audience and cost.** It must demarcate the tone, the target audience, and the sense of cost, so buyers will know if it can make a profit
4. **A killer title.** The one-two punch of a good logline must include a great title, one that "says what it is" and does so in a clever way. One of the key ingredients in a good title, however, is that it must be the headline of the story.

**Adjectives:** In any good logline, there will always be a couple of adjectives involved:

- An adjective to describe the hero
- An adjective to describe the bad guy
- A compelling goal we identify with as human beings

**Has to have a lead character:** It has to be about someone. It has to have one or two main people we can focus our attention on, identify with, and want to root for — and someone who can carry the movie's theme

**Hero in logline:** Amping up a great logline with the hero who makes the idea work best is how the idea comes to life. And let's be clear, the trick is to create heroes who: > Offer the most conflict in that situation > Have the longest way to go emotionally and... > Are the most demographically pleasing.

**The logline tells the hero's story:** Who he is, who he's up against, and what's at stake. The nice, neat form of a one- or two-sentence pitch tells you everything.

**Logline as checklist:** The logline with the most conflict, the most sharply defined hero and bad guy, and the clearest, most primal goal is the winner. And once you identify those characteristics and it works, stick to it. Use that logline to double-check your results as you begin to execute your screenplay.

## 2. Movie categories

- Movies are intricately made emotion machines. They are Swiss watches of precise gears and spinning wheels that make them tick.
- You have to be able to take them apart and put them back together again.
- It's the way we put new twists on old tales, bring them up to date, and give them a spin that's meaningful for our contemporaries.

**Genre:** The reason categorizing your movie is a good idea is that it's important for you, the screenwriter, to know what type of movie you're writing. When you are stuck in your story or when you're preparing to write, you will "screen" a dozen movies that are like the one you're working on to get clues about why certain plot elements are important, why they work or don't, and where you can change the cliché into something fresh.

**10 types of movies:** If you know what genre you're in, learn its rules and find what's essential. These categories are all you need for now to help you identify the story mechanics of the movie. The 10 types of movies are:

### *a) Monster in the House*

- Jaws, Tremors, Alien, The Exorcist, Fatal Attraction, and Panic Room
- It has two working parts: A monster. A house. And when you add people into that house, desperate to kill the monster, you've got a movie type so primal that it translates to everyone, everywhere
- The rules, to me, are simple. The "house" must be a confined space: a beach town, a spaceship, a futuristic Disneyland with dinosaurs, a family unit.
- There must be sin committed — usually greed (monetary or carnal) — prompting the creation of a supernatural monster that comes like an avenging angel to kill those who have committed that sin and spare those who realize what that sin is. The rest is "run and hide."

### *b) Golden Fleece*

- Star Wars; The Wizard of Oz; Planes, Trains and Automobiles; Back To The Future; and most "heist movies."
- A hero goes "on the road" in search of one thing and winds up discovering something else — himself.
- The milestones of The Golden Fleece are the people and incidents that our hero or heroes encounter along the way. Because it's episodic it seems to not be connected, but it must be.
- The theme of every Golden Fleece movie is internal growth; how the incidents affect the hero is, in fact, the plot. It is the way we know that we are truly making forward progress —

it's not the mileage we're racking up that makes a good Golden Fleece, it's the way the hero changes as he goes. And forcing those milestones to mean something to the hero is your job.

- Whatever fun set pieces our hero encounters must be shaded to deliver milestones of growth for our kid lead.
- It's not the incidents, it's what the hero learns about himself from those incidents that make the story work. This genre is also where all heist movies are found. Any quest, mission, or "treasure locked in a castle" that is to be approached by an individual or a group falls into the Golden Fleece category and has the same rules. Very often the mission becomes secondary to other, more personal, discoveries;

### *c) Out of the Bottle*

- Liar, Liar; Bruce Almighty; Love Potion ; Freaky Friday; Flubber
- "I wish I had a\_" is probably the single most frequently spoken prayer since Adam. And stories that tell a good "what if" tale that exploits these wish fulfillment fantasies are good, primal, easy-for-a-caveman-to-understand stories.
- The rules of Out of the Bottle then are this: If it's a wish-fulfillment tale, the hero must be a put-upon Cinderella who is so under the thumb of those around him that we are really rooting for anyone, or anything, to get him a little happiness.
- And yet, so the rules tell us and human nature dictates, we don't want to see anyone, even the most underdog character, succeed for too long. And eventually, the hero must learn that magic isn't everything, it's better to be just like us — us members of the audience — because in the end we know this will never happen to us.
- Thus a lesson must be in the offing; a good moral must be included at the end.

### *d) Dude with a Problem*

- This is a genre that ranges in style, tone, and emotional substance from Breakdown and Die Hard to Titanic and Schindler's List.
- "An ordinary guy finds himself in extraordinary circumstances."
- Two very simple working parts: a dude, meaning an average guy or gal just like ourselves. And a problem: something that this average guy must dig deep inside himself to conquer.
- Make the bad guy as bad as possible — always! — for the bigger the problem, the greater the odds for our dude to overcome.

### *e) Rites Of Passage*

(Every change-of-life story from Ordinary People to Days of Wine and Roses makes this category.)

- These are tales of pain and torment, but usually from an outside force: Life. Sure it's about the choices we've made, but the "monster" attacking us is often unseen, vague, or one which we can't get a handle on simply because we can't name it.
- In essence, whether the take is comedic or dramatic, the monster sneaks up on the beleaguered hero and the story is that hero's slow realization of who and what that monster is.
- In the end, these tales are about surrendering, the victory won by giving up to forces stronger than ourselves.
- The end point is acceptance of our humanity and the moral of the story is always the same: That's Life!

### *f) Buddy Love*

- This genre is about more than the buddy movie dynamic as seen in cop buddy pictures, Dumb & Dumber, and Rain Man — but also every love story ever made!
- The secret of a good buddy movie is that it is actually a love story in disguise.
- At first the "buddies" hate each other. (Where would they have to go if they didn't?) But their adventure together brings out the fact that they need each other; they are, in essence, incomplete halves of a whole. And realizing this leads to even more conflict. Who can tolerate needing anybody?
- Ultimately, the All Is Lost moment which occurs toward the end of each of these stories is: separation, a fight, a goodbye-and-good-riddance! that is, in reality, none of these. It's just two people who can't stand the fact that they don't live as well without each other, who will have to surrender their egos to win.
- And when the final curtain comes down, they have done just that. Often, as in Rain Man, one of the buddies is the story's hero and will do all or most of the changing (i.e., Tom Cruise) while the other buddy acts as a catalyst of that change and will do slight or no changing (i.e., Dustin Hoffman).

### *g) Whydunit*

- Who cares who, it's why that counts. Includes Chinatown, China Syndrome, JFK, and The Insider.
- The "who" is never as interesting as the "why." Unlike the Golden Fleece, a good Whydunit isn't about the hero changing, it's about the audience discovering something about human nature they did not think was possible before the "crime" was committed and the "case" began.

- While we have a surrogate or surrogates onscreen doing the work for us, it's we who must ultimately sift through the information, and we who must be shocked by what we find.

### *h) The Fool Triumphant*

- One of the oldest story types, this category includes *Being There*, *Forrest Gump*, *Dave*, *The Jerk*, *Amadeus*, and the work of silent clowns like Chaplin, Keaton, and Lloyd.
- On the outside, he's just the Village Idiot, but further examination reveals him to be the wisest among us.
- The operating principal of "The Fool Triumphant" is to set the underdog Fool against a bigger, more powerful, and often "establishment" bad guy. Watching a so-called "idiot" get the goat of those society deems to be the winners in life gives us all hope, and pokes fun at the structures we take so seriously in our day-to-day lives.
- The working parts of a Fool Triumphant movie are simple: an underdog — who is seemingly so inept and so unequipped for life that everyone around him discounts his odds for success.
- Often, the Fool has an accomplice, an "insider" who is in on the joke and can't believe the Fool is getting away with his "ruse": Salieri in *Amadeus*, the Doctor in *Being There*, Lieutenant Dan in *Forrest Gump*.

### *i) Institutionalized*

- Just like it sounds, this is about groups: *Animal House*, *M\*A\*S\*H*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and "family" sagas such as *American Beauty* and *The Godfather*.
- When we band together as a group with a common cause, we reveal the ups and downs of sacrificing the goals of the few for those of the many.
- "Institutionalized" tells stories about groups, institutions, and "families." These stories are special because they both honor the institution and expose the problems of losing one's identity to it.
- These movies are all about the pros and cons of putting the group ahead of ourselves.
- Ultimately, all the stories in this category come down to a question: Who's crazier, me or them?
- it's the same movie, with the same message, told in extremely different and moving ways

### *j) Superhero*

- This isn't just about the obvious tales you'd think of, like *Superman* and *Batman*, but also includes *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, even *Gladiator* and *A Beautiful Mind*.

- The "Superhero" genre is the exact opposite of Dude with a Problem and can best be defined by its opposite definition: An extraordinary person finds himself in an ordinary world.
- Gladiator and A Beautiful Mind are good examples of human superheroes that are challenged by the mediocre world around them. In both those films, it is the tiny minds that surround the hero that are the real problem.
- Born into a world he did not create, the Superhero must deal with those who are jealous of his unique point of view and superior mind.
- The creation myth that begins each Superhero franchise stresses sympathy for the Superhero's plight. Our identification with him must come from sympathy for the plight of being misunderstood.
- It gives flight to our greatest fantasies about our potential, while tempering those fantasies with a dose of reality

### 3. Primal urge

**Attention:** primal urges get our attention. Survival, hunger, sex, protection of loved ones, fear of death grab us. The best ideas and the best characters in the lead roles must have basic needs, wants, and desires. Basic, basic

**Hero:** this is all about your hero. Give him stakes. Real stakes. Primal stakes. Stakes that are basic, that we understand. Make the hero want something real and simple: survival, hunger, sex, protection of loved ones, fear of death

**Archetypes:** Your leads should be able to be played by many actors and actresses. Isn't Jim Carrey Jerry Lewis? Isn't Tom Hanks Jimmy Stewart? The reason is that these archetypes exist to satisfy our inner need to see these shadow creations in our brains played out onscreen. It's the Jungian archetypes these actors represent that we're interested in seeing. And if you always remember to write for the archetype, and not the star, the casting will take care of itself.

**The rule of thumb:** Stick to the basics no matter what. Tell me a story about a guy who:

- I can identify with
- I can learn from
- I have compelling reason to follow
- I believe deserves to win
- Has stakes that are primal and ring true for me.

Follow that simple prescription for finding the hero of your movie and you can't go wrong.

**The perfect hero:** It's how the "who" and the "what is it?" come together in an intriguing combination that makes us want to see this story unfold. The perfect hero is the one who offers the most conflict in the situation, has the longest emotional journey, and has a primal goal we can all root for.

**Primal desire:** By making each character's desire more primal, that plot is grounded in a reality that everyone can understand — suddenly it's not about stockbrokers, it's about human beings trying to survive. Here are primal drives in the storylines of a few hit films:

- The desire to save one's family (Die Hard)
- The desire to protect one's home (Home Alone)
- The desire to find a mate (Sleepless in Seattle)
- The desire to exact revenge (Gladiator)
- The desire to survive (Titanic)

## 4. Structure: The Blake Snyder Beat Sheet

What you have done so far:

1. You've polished your one-line and pitched enough "civilians" to know you've got a good one.
2. You've screened a dozen movies that are in the category of story you're trying to tell.
3. You've come up with the perfect hero and antagonist, and amped up both the hero's primal goal and the conflict in the way of his achieving it.

### Structure (pages)

1. Opening Image (1):
2. Theme Stated (5):
3. Set-up (1-10):
4. Catalyst (12):
5. Debate (12-25):
6. Break into Two (25)
7. B Story (30):
8. Fun and Games (30-55):
9. Midpoint (55):
10. Bad Guys Close In (55-75):
11. All Is Lost (75):
12. Dark Night of the Soul (75-85):
13. Break into Three (85):
14. Finale (85-110)
15. Final Image (no)

### *Opening image (1)*

- The very first impression of what a movie is — its tone, its mood, the type and scope of the film — are all found in the opening image.
- The opening and final images should be opposites, a plus and a minus, showing change so dramatic it documents the emotional upheaval that the movie represents. Often actors will only read the first and last IO pages of a script to see if that drastic change is in there,

### *Theme stated (5)*

- Somewhere in the first five minutes of a well-structured screenplay , someone (usually not the main character) will pose a question or make a statement (usually to the main character) that is the theme of the movie. "Be careful what you wish for,"
- It won't be this obvious, it will be conversational, an offhand remark that the main character doesn't quite get at the moment — but which will have far-reaching and meaningful impact later.
- This statement is the movie's thematic premise.

- The rest of the screenplay is the argument laid out, either proving or disproving this statement, and looking at it, pro and con, from every angle.
- Be certain that the subject is raised right up front — page 5 is where I always put it. Declare: I can prove it. Then set out to do so.

## *Set up (1-10)*

- The first 10 pages of the script, or first dozen pages at most, is called the "set-up." If you're like me, and like most readers in Hollywood, this is the make-or-break section where you have to grab me or risk losing my interest.
- Make sure you have introduced or hinted at introducing every character in the A story.
- The first 10 pages is also where we start to plant every character tic, exhibit every behavior that needs to be addressed later on, and show how and why the hero will need to change in order to win.
- And when there's something that our hero wants or is lacking, this is the place to stick the Six Things That Need Fixing.
- Like little time bombs, these Six Things That Need Fixing, these character tics and flaws, will be exploded later in the script, turned on their heads and cured. They will become running gags and call-backs. We, the audience, must know why they're being called back!
- It's where we see the world as it is before the adventure starts. It is a full-fledged documentation of the hero's world labeled "before."

## *Catalyst (12)*

- Catalyst moments: telegrams, getting fired, catching the wife in bed with another man, news that you have three days to live, the knock at the door, the messenger. In the set-up you, the screenwriter, have told us what the world is like and now in the catalyst moment you knock it all down. Boom!
- Life-changing events often come disguised as bad news. Like many of the beats in the BS2, the catalyst is not what it seems. It's the opposite of good news, and yet, by the time the adventure is over, it's what leads the hero to happiness.

## *Debate (12-25)*

- It's the last chance for the hero to say: This is crazy. And we need him or her to realize that. Should I go? Dare I go? Sure, it's dangerous out there, but what's my choice? Stay here
- The debate section must ask a question of some kind. In Legally Blonde the catalyst of the fiancé dumping Elle Woods quickly segues to her solution: Go to Harvard Law. "But can she

get in?" That is the question posed in the debate section of that movie. The debate section thus becomes showing how Elle answers that question.

### ***Break into two (25)***

- Page 25 is the place where I always go to first in a screenplay someone has handed me (we all have our reading quirks) to see "what happens on 25." I want to know 1) if anything happens and 2) if this screenwriter knows that something should happen. And I mean something big.
- The act break is the moment where we leave the old world, the thesis statement, behind and proceed into a world that is the upside down version of that, its antithesis. But because these two worlds are so distinct, the act of actually stepping into Act Two must be definite.
- The hero cannot be lured, tricked, or drift into Act Two. The hero must make the decision himself. That's what makes him a hero anyway — being proactive.

### ***B story (30)***

- The B story of most screenplays is "the love story." It is also the story that carries the theme of the movie. I also think that the start of the B story, what takes place around page 30, is a little booster rocket that helps smooth over the shockingly obvious A story act break.
- The B story is also very often a brand new bunch of characters. We have not always met the B story players in the first 10 pages of the screenplay.

### ***Fun and games (30-55)***

- The promise of the premise. It is the core and essence of the movie's poster. It is where most of the trailer moments of a movie are found. And it's where we aren't as concerned with the forward progress of the story — the stakes won't be raised until the midpoint — as we are concerned with having "fun."
- We take a break from the stakes of the story and see what the idea is about; we see the promise of the premise and need not see anything else.

### ***Midpoint (55)***

- A movie's midpoint is either an "up" where the hero seemingly peaks (though it is a false peak) or a "down" when the world collapses all around the hero (though it is a false collapse), and it can only get better from here on out.
- The stakes are raised at the midpoint.
- It's the point where the fun and games are over. It's back to the story! It's also the point where if you have a "false victory"

- The rule is: It's never as good as it seems to be at the midpoint and it's never as bad as it seems at the All Is Lost point. Or vice versa!

### *Bad guys close in (55-75)*

- This is the point where the bad guys decide to regroup and send in the heavy artillery. It's the point where internal dissent, doubt, and jealousy begin to disintegrate the hero's team
- The forces that are aligned against the hero, internal and external, tighten their grip. Evil is not giving up, and there is nowhere for the hero to go for help. He is on his own and must endure.

### *All is lost (75)*

- At the All Is Lost moment, stick in something, anything that involves a death. It works every time. Whether it's integral to the story or just something symbolic, hint at something dead here.
- It could be anything. A flower in a flower pot. A goldfish. News that a beloved aunt has passed away. It's all the same.
- The reason is that the All Is Lost beat is the "Christ on the cross" moment. It's where the old world, the old character, the old way of thinking dies.
- the thing you show dying, even a goldfish, will resonate and make that All Is Lost moment all the more poignant

### *Dark night of the soul (75-85)*

- So now you're in the middle of a death moment at the All Is Lost point, but how does your character experiencing this moment feel about it?
- This question is answered in a section of the screenplay I call Dark Night of the Soul. It can last five seconds or five minutes. But it's in there. And it's vital. It's the point, as the name suggests, that is the darkness right before the dawn.
- It is the point just before the hero reaches way, deep down and pulls out that last, best idea that will save himself and everyone around him. But at the moment, that idea is nowhere in sight.
- We must be beaten and know it to get the lesson. The Dark Night of the Soul is that point.

### *Break into three (85)*

- Both in the external story (the A story) and the internal story (the B story), which now meet and intertwine, the hero has prevailed, passed every test, and dug deep to find the solution. Now all he has to do is apply it.

## *Finale (85-110)*

- The finale is Act Three. This is where we wrap it up. It's where the lessons learned are applied. It's where the character tics are mastered.
- It's where A story and B story end in triumph for our hero. It's the turning over of the old world and a creation of a new world order — all thanks to the hero, who leads the way based on what he experienced in the upside-down, antithetical world of Act Two.
- The chief source of "the problem" — a person or thing — must be dispatched completely for the new world order to exist.

## *Final image (110)*

- As stated earlier, the final image in a movie is the opposite of the opening image. It is your proof that change has occurred and that it's real.

## 5. Using cards and the board

The Board is a way for you to "see" your movie before you start writing. It is a way to easily test different scenes, story arcs, ideas, bits of dialogue and story rhythms, and decide whether they work.

### *First cards first*

Take three long strips of masking tape and make four equal rows.

- Row #1 is Act One (pages 1-25)
- row #2 represents the first half of Act Two up to the midpoint (25-55)
- row #3 is the midpoint to the Break into Act Three (55-85)
- row #4 is Act Three to the movie's final image (85-110)

What goes on your final 40 is very simple. Each card stands for a scene, so where does the scene take place? Is it an INTERIOR or an EXTERIOR? Is it a sequence of scenes like a chase that covers several locations? If you can see it, write it with a magic marker: INT. JOE'S APARTMENT - DAY.

Each card should also include the basic action of the scene told in simple declarative sentences. Example: "Mary tells Joe she wants a divorce."

**Best ideas first:** In any storytelling venture, the most burning ideas you have for scenes are what must be laid out first.

**The major turns:** The next cards you really must nail in there are the hinge points of the story: midpoint, Act Two break, Act One break.

- Figure out the major turns first. In most cases, nailing the midpoint will help guide you — and it is the one decision you must make before you can go on.
- With the midpoint nailed, the All Is Lost is not too hard to figure out. It's the flip of the midpoint.
- If you nail these two points, the Break into Three is usually cake. Now your board is starting to flesh itself out.

**Overloaded acts and black holes:** A lot of times what I'll see spread out there are seven or eight cards with things like "the hero is a wrongly accused felon" next to "the hero is a saxophone player." Well, these are not scenes, this is backstory. And these cards will eventually be folded into one card labeled "Meet the Hero" during an actual scene.

**Try anything:** Never fear, it will all be pared down eventually. Point is to get it all out. This is the time to try anything, think of everything, and stick it all up there to see what it looks like.

**Color coding:** How each character's story unfolds and crosses with others needs to be seen to be successfully worked out.

**Stripping it down:** The finished board should have 40 cards. That's roughly 10 cards per row. Examine each beat and see if the action or intent can't be folded into another scene or eliminated altogether.

### **+/- AND ><**

Two really important things you must put on each card and answer to your satisfaction before you can begin writing your screenplay: One is the symbol +/- . The other is the symbol >< . These two symbols should be written in a color pen you have not used and put at the bottom of each card.

**The +/- sign:** Represents the emotional change you must execute in each scene. Think of each scene as a mini-movie. It must have a beginning, middle, and an end. And it must also have something happen that causes the emotional tone to change drastically either from + to — or from — to + just like the opening and final images of a movie.

**Example:** At the beginning of a scene your hero is feeling cocky. He's a lawyer and he's just won a big case. Then his wife enters with news. Now that the case is over, she wants a divorce. Clearly what started as a + emotionally for your lawyer hero is now a — emotionally. An emotional change like this must occur in every scene.

**The >< symbol:** Denotes conflict: To understand what the conflict is, I always like to think of a scene like this: As the lights come up, two people walk into a room from opposite doors, meet in the middle, and begin to struggle past each other to reach the door on the other side.

They each enter the scene with a goal and standing in their way is an obstacle. That's conflict. And whether it's physical or verbal or simply a guy who really needs to pee and must get to a bathroom soon or else!, that conflict must be foremost on your mind when you conceive each scene.

The symbol >< on the bottom of each card must be filled in with who each of the players is in each scene of conflict, what the issue is, and who wins by the end. Only one conflict per scene.

**Prepare the battlefield:** What The Board will do for you is prepare the battlefield, allow you to test your theories, grind in certain notions, and minimize others

**Most important from the board:** The necessity of hitting your act break on page 25, hitting the midpoint and All Is Lost hard, and the need to have conflict in every scene.

## 6. The immutable laws of screenplay physics

**Save the Cat (STC):** Is the screenwriting rule that says: "The hero has to do something when we meet him so that we like him and want him to win."

**Semi-bad hero:** The problem of making anti-heroes likeable, or heroes of a comeuppance tale likeable enough to root for, can also be finessed with STC. The Immutable Laws of Screenplay Physics tell us that when you have a semi-bad guy as your hero — just make his antagonist worse!!

**Sync audience and main character:** Though you don't have to have a scene in every movie where the hero literally saves a cat, helps an old lady across the street, or gets splashed by water at the street corner to make us love him, you must take the audience by the hand every time out and get them in sync with your main character and your story. You must take time to frame the hero's situation in a way that makes us root for him, no matter who he is or what he does.

**Exposition:** is backstory or details of the plot that must be told to the audience in order for them to understand what happens next.

**One piece of magic:** Audiences will only accept one piece of magic per movie. It's The Law. You cannot see aliens from outer space land in a UFO and then be bitten by a Vampire and now be both aliens and undead

**Watch Out for That Glacier rule:** Must be stakes for people we care about. And what might happen to them must be shown from the get-go so we know the consequences of the imminent threat. If not, you are violating the Watch Out for That Glacier rule.

**The Covenant of the Arc:** Is the screenwriting law that says: Every single character in your movie must change in the course of your story. The only characters who don't change are the bad guys

**Arc:** Is a term that means "the change that occurs to any character from the beginning, through the middle, and to the end of each character's 'journey'". When we can chart the growth and change each character undergoes in the course of a movie, it's a poem. What you are saying in essence is: This story, this experience, is so important, so life-changing for all involved — even you, the audience — it affects every single person that is in its orbit.

**Change:** The measuring stick that tells us who succeeds and who doesn't is seen in the ability to change. To succeed in life is to be able to transform.

**Press in screenwriting:** Unless it's about the press, unless your movie involves a worldwide problem and we follow stories with characters all over the world, and it's important for them all to know about each other, keep the press out.

**The hero must be proactive:** It's The Law. If he's not, he's not a hero. Here's a checklist:

1. Is your hero's goal clearly stated in the set-up? Is what your hero wants obvious to you and to the audience? Make sure that goal is spoken aloud and restated in action and words throughout the story.
2. Do clues of what to do next just come to your hero or does he seek them out? Your hero cannot be handed his destiny, he must work for it at every step.
3. Is your hero active or passive? If the latter, you have a problem. Everything your hero does has to spring from his burning desire and his deeply held need to achieve his goal.
4. Do other characters tell your hero what to do or does he tell them? Here's a great rule of thumb: A hero never asks questions! The hero knows and others around him look to him for answers, not the other way around.

**Talking the plot:** Your characters don't serve you, they serve themselves. They should walk into each scene with their own goals and say what's on their minds, not yours. You must reveal who they are and what they want, their hopes, dreams, and fears, by how they say it as much as what they say. Good dialogue tells us more about what's going on in its subtext than on its surface. Subtle is better. And talking the plot is like using a sledgehammer. It's overkill.

**Show not tell:** By showing and not telling, you leave room for your characters to be at their best — that's being active, with their own separate agendas for being there, not yours. As in Life, character is revealed by action taken, not by words spoken. You should be more concerned with what's happening now than what happened before the story started.

**Make the bad guy badder:** We cannot protect our hero from danger and challenge; we must throw a little more at him than he is able to take. And making the bad guy badder automatically makes the hero bigger.

**Hero vs. bad guy:** The hero and the bad guy are a matched set and should be of equal skill and strength, with the bad guy being just slightly more powerful than the hero because he is willing to go to any lengths to win. Give the edge to the bad guy. By ratcheting up the power and invincibility of the bad guy, the hero will have to do more that we can admire.

**Plot pace:** The rule is: It's not enough for the plot to go forward, it must go forward faster, and with more complexity, to the climax. More must be revealed along every step of the plot about your characters and what all this action means.

**Intensifying the plot:** As the grip of the bad guy tightens around the hero, things happen faster, and the pressure exerted in the vice-like grip of the forces opposing the hero will finally

explode in its Act Three climax with a rush of energy and emotion. If you don't feel your plot intensifying as you make the midpoint turn and start heading for the finish, you have problems

## *Diverse emotions*

- Making it an emotional experience, using all the emotions, is what it's about.
- If your script feels one-note emotionally, go back and flesh it out using all the colors in the palette. Where is your lust scene? Where is your frustration scene? Where is your scary scene? And if you don't have these, take a scene that's just funny or just dramatic and try to play it for one of the missing colors.
- By varying the emotions you use, you'll create a much more rewarding experience for everyone
- If your script is full of lines that are right out of real life, that ring true but ring dull, you're not working hard enough to make the characters come to life.

## *Character tonality*

- Engaging characters talk differently than you and I. They have a way of saying things, even the most mundane things, which raise them above the norm.
- A character's dialogue is your opportunity to reveal character and tell us who this person is as much as what he is saying. How someone talks is character and can highlight all manner of that character's past, inner demons, and outlook on life. Every time a character speaks is your chance to show that.
- Bad Dialogue Test: Take a page of your script and cover up the names of the people speaking. Now read the repartee as it goes back and forth between two or more characters. Can you tell who is speaking without seeing the name above the dialogue?
- In a good script, every character must speak differently. Every character must have a unique way of saying. Make sure every character has "A Limp and an Eyepatch." Every character has to have a unique way of speaking, but also something memorable that will stick him in the reader's mind.

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