

STORY-SHAPING AND VISUALISATION

- WHAT IS A STORY?
- A SIMPLE PLOT

WHAT IS A STORY?

Storytellers agree that every story has three main stages – Beginning, Middle and End.

Screenwriters call it a three-act formula: Set-up, Conflict and Resolution.

In the Set-up we are introduced to the Protagonist. We see enough of him to care what happens to him. He wants something – even if it's only to carry on being happy.

Then he meets the Problem. This involves the antagonist – the baddie. Immediately we have Conflict. This is the longest act, with the hero solving an immediate problem, then finding another one in his path – in many cases it's the previous solution that causes the next stumbling block.

Eventually the protagonist achieves his goal and we have resolution,.

Think about the last film you saw – chances are a hundred to one that it followed the formula.

Here's another formula:

HERO'S GOAL + OBSTACLE = CONFLICT.

Conflict, conflict, and more conflict is the basis of good filmic storytelling.

The skill is to keep focus on the protagonist and to build conflict so the journey of the protagonist moves into more dangerous and challenging territory, leading to the final confrontation and resolution.

Remember what Sam Goldwyn said: "Drama is life with the boring bits cut out."

A SIMPLE PLOT

A man arrives home unexpectedly early. He opens the door and calls out. No answer.

However, he notices a frilly blouse at the foot of the stairs. He looks up further, and there's a skirt and a brassiere. Shock horror!

He climbs the stairs and sees a stocking and, just outside a door, a pair of knickers.

He grits his teeth and shoves open the door. To find:

Six year old daughter with more of mummy's clothing, high heels and lipstick.

The three parts are:

- Set-up: He's happy – going home early. Looking forward to seeing family.
- Conflict: Is the happy family not so very happy?
- Resolution: It was just a bit of dressing-up. Happiness again.

Most films have three acts. Of course, on a longer feature film the conflict section usually has many smaller three-act sub-structures within it, one leading on to the next.

The same structure works for non-fiction as well.

THREE ACTS FOR NON-FICTION

- PROBLEM
- SOLUTION
- RESOLUTION

PROBLEM

I want to encourage people to save water. I can tell them to do so – but what effect will that have? Exactly – none!

So let's show them that wasting water is a bad thing. Think of pictures that say 'lack of water'.

How many can you think of?

- Hand turns tap. Water trickles, then dries up.
- Dead, brown plant. Hand tries to take withered flower. It disintegrates.
- Reservoir shows dry cracked earth.
- Bottled water delivery; lots of banknotes given in return.
- Grimy clothes, grimmer people. Difficult to show, so you'd have to get people to wrinkle noses, move off when somebody comes close, etc. Grey or beige looks 'dirtier' than bright coloured garments.
- Shoot exteriors on a grey, overcast day.
- Dog or cat goes to bowl. Empty. Looks pitiful.
- A sick, dehydrated child. Intravenous drip. Close on child's face as nurse wields needle.

That's just some of the possibilities.

SOLUTION

Now think of ways to show water saving:

- Bucket under washbasin – collects water – used on plants.
- Tap turned off whilst tooth-brushing.
- Brick sealed in plastic bag put in toilet cistern.
- Fill drinking mugs – pour into kettle, then boil.
- Steam food, not boil. Keep water for next meal.
- Showering with a friend.

RESOLUTION

Now how can you show that happiness has been caused by those measures?

- Happy family playing in garden.
- Green grass, summery flowers.
- Brightly-coloured clothes - clean again because water is available to wash them properly.
- Dog rushing around full of life.

That's not perfect, but it only took a few minutes. And the three acts are there: Problem, Solution and Resolution.