The Nine-Act Structure of Feature Films

David Siegel Nov 3, 2018 · 50 min read

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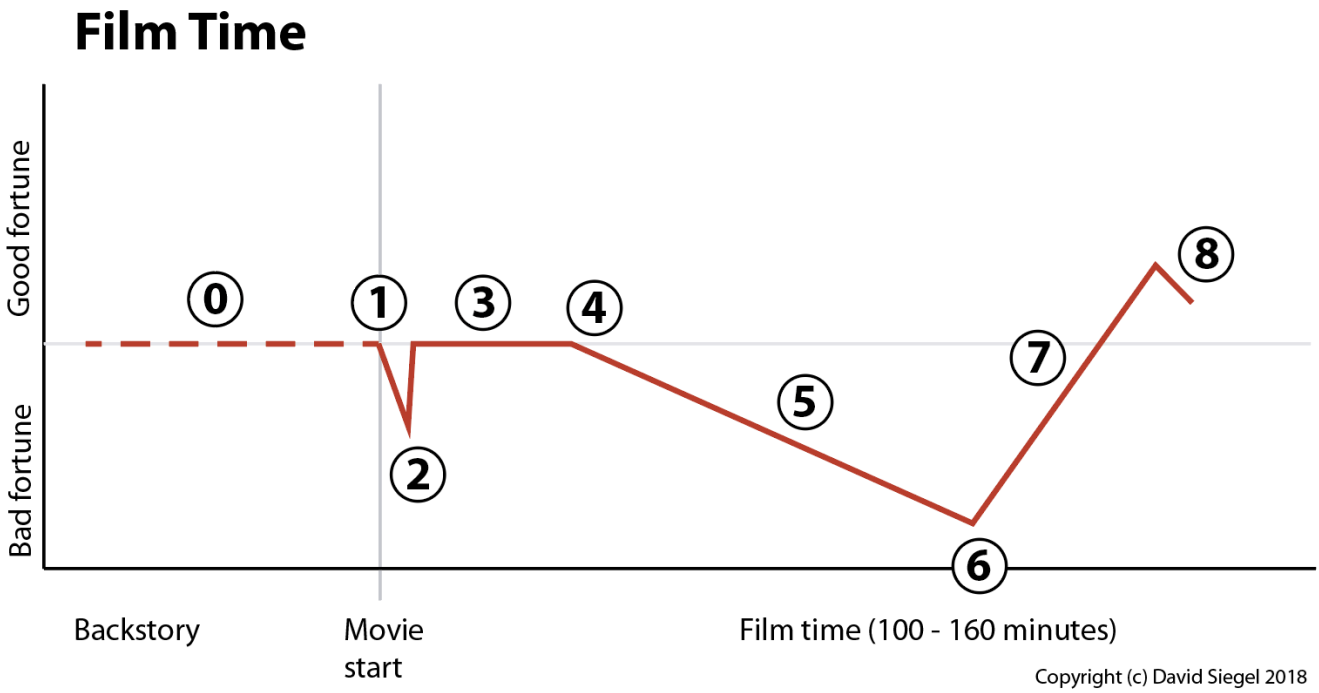

This is the definitive **Nine-Act Structure page** by the originator of the concept, David Siegel.

NOTE: This page is for screenwriters and people in the film business. It's a master class on story structure in 12,000 words and 40+ film clips. If you really spend time understanding this material, it's somewhere between 5 (intro) and 500 (PhD) hours of work. There are quiz questions at the end.

WARNING – FILM BUFFS: if you read this for ten minutes, you will forever understand how films work and may not enjoy them as much. Enter at your own risk.

Table of Contents

What is the Nine-Act Structure?

The Nine-Act Structure is a paradigm for understanding how feature films work. When you read a script, you may be interested in the characters, the theme, the message, the dialogue, etc., but you have to ask whether the story works or not. If the story *works*, most of the time it follows the Nine-Act Structure.

I would call the Nine-Act Structure a tool, not a prescription. A Google search of "Siegel nine-act structure" turns up many pages and books on narrative structure. I've had email interactions with several of these authors and read their work. Not a single person I've communicated with has truly understood the tool. This is my attempt to set the record straight.

A Short History of the Nine-Act Structure

In 1986–90, I spent much of my time learning how movies work. I did it after writing a script that, according to friends, "didn't work," and I wanted to find out why. So I rented more than 100 films (VHS tapes), and I watched each one with a stopwatch, taking notes of what happened during each minute of each film. Here's an example from ***Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade***:

1			Open on a shot of a rock jutting up into the sky. We are in the badlands of Utah and we pan over to a boy scout troop on horseback.
2			They ride through the amazing countryside, the rocks looking like majestic castles. They come to a cove formed by several natural rock bridges.
3			There is a fat, clumsy scout. The scout master warns everyone that caves nearby can go on for miles, and to be cautious. The fat scout doesn't want to be exploring the cave, but his companion hears something and goes to investigate.
4	-1		They find a smashed in tomb, goons digging for treasure inside. They've found a box and they bring it to a fedora wearing man. Inside the box is the cross of Coranado, a jewel encrusted relic. Fat scout: "Indy, what are they doing?" A young Indiana Jones looks closer, he's not sure. Text: "Utah: 1912" Indy recognizes the cross, he's wicked smart.
5	-1		Fedora sets the cross down. Indy orders fatty to go get the sheriff. Indy slips down into the tomb and grabs the cross, then climbs the rope back up. He accidentally kicks a beam, however, alerting the goons. Cut to Indy on the run.
6	-2		The scout troop's moved on, and Indy calls for his horse. He goes to jump in the saddle, but falls to the ground. He gets on his horse and takes off. Fedora summons a truck being followed by a sports car with a fat man in a white suit. They case Indy and he sees that he's approaching a speeding train.
7	-2		Indy rides along the train and grabs on, as do the thugs. He runs down the length of the train, which happens to be a traveling circus' train. Indy crawls into the Reptile House rail car and climbs through a suspended catwalk hung above crocodiles and other dangerous beasts, including bins full of slithering snakes. The catwalk gives way under all the extra weight and Indy finds himself face to face with an anaconda, only to roll into a bin and become buried in snakes. Indy freaks out! Now we know why Indy hates snakes!
8	-2		Indy runs out and locks the thugs in. He fishes a snake out of his shirt. Another goon is on him and trips him so he falls onto the top of one of the rail cars. Inside a lamp falls and lands on a rhinoceros's head, annoying it. Cut to Indy struggling with the goon when the rhino's horn comes busting out of the roof of the railcar. Indy and the goon panic and Indy manages to swing away on a water hose, but only finds himself face to face with Fedora.
9	-2		Indy crawls back and manages to fall down into another railcar and finds himself face to face with a lion. Indy sees a whip on the wall and grabs it. He uses it but only manages to cut his chin. That's where Indy got that scar from! Indy manages to scare the lion back. He tosses up the whip to Fedora who pulls him to safety. Fedora: "You've got heart kid, but that belongs to me."
10	-2		Indy wants it to go to a museum, and another snake emerging from his shirt distracts the goons enough for him to run off into the caboose, with a sign identifying it as a Magic Caboose. Indy finds the back door locked and hides in a coffin like box. Fedora appears and kicks the box open. Indy's vanished! Fedora runs to the back to see Indy running off. Despite himself, Fedora is pleased.
11	-1		Cut to Indy running home, calling for his father. His father isn't interested, is too busy, tells Indy to count to 20 in Greek. Indy sees Fatty returning with the sheriff and goes to speak to him. We see that Indy's father was copying a drawing into his journal. The sheriff appears, asks for the cross.
12	-2		Fedora appears, he's the artifact's legal owner. The sheriff threatens to press charges if Indy doesn't cooperate. Indy sees the fat man in the white suit. Indy is furious. Fedora: "You lost today kid, but it doesn't mean you have to like it." Fedora takes his hat and pushes it on to Indy's head. Indy looks up, and we are in the present as he's getting his ass kicked on the deck of a ship. Text: "Portuguese Coast: 1938."
13	-3		The fat guy in the white suit is there. He gloats, then pulls the cross out of Indy's pouch. He wants Indy thrown over the side, but Indy manages to kick one of the goons over the side. There's a storm raging and Indy manages to not get thrown overboard.
14	-2		The cross gets thrown clear, is almost washed over the edge. Indy grabs it and runs off, punching out guards left and right. He grabs a hook and swings overboard. Moments later the boat explodes due to an unrelated accident. The ship sinks.
15			Indy sees the white hat floating away. Cut to Indy's university, where he's giving a lecture on how archaeology is all about research, not treasure hunting. Once again his class is full of adoring young girls. Indy: "X never, ever marks the spot." Marcus Brody appears.
16			Indy dismisses the class and gives Marcus the cross. Marcus is pleased as is Indy. Indy goes to his office, barely avoiding all the girls who want to speak to him.
17			Indy backs into his office, sees a package has arrived for him from Venice. Indy doesn't want to work so he slips out his office window.
18			Some men in a black car follow him and call him over. They surround him. Cut to Indy at a posh apartment somewhere. Walter Donovan appears and introduces himself, he's a wealthy philanthropist. He shows Indy his newest find, a broken stone grave marker.
19			Indy estimates it from the mid 12th century. Walter's men found it while excavating for copper. Indy starts translating the text, and it speaks of a path through deserts and mountains to the canyon of the crescent moon, "to the temple where the cup that holds the blood of Jesus Christ resides forever." Walter: "The Holy Grail, Dr. Jones."
20			Indy knows all about the Grail. Walter believes the legends and is excited by the idea of eternal life. Walter mentions that Indy's father was obsessed with the Grail. Indy is uncomfortable, but admits that his father loved Grail lore. Indy doesn't think the tablet gives enough information to get too excited about.
21			There's a huge chunk of the tablet missing too. Walter says that a search is nonetheless underway. Walter tells a story about how the Grail, after vanishing for thousands of years, re-appeared with three knights of the first crusade, three brothers. Indy knows the story, and it ends with only one of the brothers returning to France and entrusting his tale to a monk. Walter has the manuscript where the monk wrote the story down, and it speaks of two markers being left behind.
22	-1		Walter: "This is the first marker!... The other marker is entombed with the knight's dead brother, which our team leader believes is in Venice, Italy." Walter is excited, but they've hit a snag, their project leader has vanished, and Walter wants Indy to pick up where he left off.

Minutes are on the left; the numbers in column B indicate the protagonist's fortune, so it can be graphed. There are various conventions to indicate montages, flashbacks, songs, etc. There are other pages for characters, analysis, and more. I did this for about eighty films. And I realized that the two-goal plot showed up in the vast majority of commercially successful feature films. I quickly fleshed out the nine acts, and the structure was born.

In 1992, I made a book proposal and my agent sent it to Disney. They sent back a letter saying "It's a remarkably obsessive piece of work, but we don't see much of a market for it." I tried to sell the project to IMDB; they passed. In 1995, I put up several pages on my web site to explain the structure, and that's where many people found it. Since then, it has been passed around, misunderstood, copied and pasted, and the original work

still lives on Archive.org. In the early 2000s, I hired a sharp film geek named Kevin Brooks, and he did another hundred or so movies — I still have all the original files. But I didn't do anything with the project and got busy with other things. Now it's available to the world.

I have written many scripts but sent only one to producers. It wasn't picked up. I'll link to it at the end.

The Nine Act Structure vs the Three-Act Structure

People don't understand the Nine-Act Structure, because they are so used to Syd Field and Robert McKee's story paradigms. The more you have used the traditional three-act structure, the more difficult you will find it to understand my tool. The Nine-Act structure is a much more accurate tool than the three-act structure. If the three-act structure is a magnifying glass, the Nine-Act Structure is a microscope.

The key is to focus on the protagonist's goal, not on the direction of the action. In a typical script conversation, writers will talk about "reversals" every 20 pages or so, because they want to keep the story changing direction to make it interesting. In my world, you focus on two things: the antagonist's goal, and the protagonist's goal, and those two things naturally lead to the train wreck that unfolds between them.

> In my world, a reversal is very specific — it's the moment when the protagonist changes her goal.

The Two-Goal Structure

At the heart of the Nine-Act Structure is the *Two-Goal Structure*. Ninety-nine percent of all feature films are either single-goal or two-goal. In both these story types, something (usually bad) happens, and something must be done.

In a single-goal film, it's clear what must be done, and either a) the right person for the job does the job or b) the wrong person for the job does the job. Or, he/she fails, in which case it's a tragedy. Either way, I call this a linear plot. A classic example is ***Nemo***. Nemo is the protagonist. Once he is picked up, his goal is to get back home. There are many obstacles, but eventually he finds his dad and goes back to his beloved reef. Most ***Bond films*** are linear. ***Jaws*** was linear. ***Cast Away*** is linear. ***Mission Impossible***

5 is linear, though several other MI films are not. The goal of the protagonist of a linear story is to put the world back the way it was before. Generally, he is changed in the process.

The original ***Star Wars*** story is interesting. You might think there are two goals: 1) get the droid to the rebel base, then 2) go destroy the death star. But Leah has laid everything out in her hologram speech at the beginning: bring the droid to the rebel base, where the rebels will look for a weakness they can exploit to destroy the death star. Luke knows that bringing the droid to the rebels is just the first half of the mission. This story has many two-goal attributes but is in fact linear.

In a two-goal film, the hero believes her first goal is the right solution to the current problem, but in fact it's a trap. This is often referred to as *the false goal*. Sometimes, she actually attains it, but most of the time she stops short, because she *learns what's really going on* and needs a new goal to save the day. Occasionally the hero achieves the second goal and dies in the effort (e.g., ***Braveheart***) — it's still a triumph.

In a feature film, there can be at most one false goal. I can only name one film with *two* false goals — ***Predator*** — and I hope it remains the only one, because there's no room in 110 minutes for three goals and two reversals.

> In my world, a reversal is very specific — it's the moment when the protagonist changes her goal.

Most of the time, the second goal is bigger in scope and much more is at stake than in the false goal. Most of the time, the second goal is *to prevent the bad guy's plan from happening*. Examples of two-goal plots:

In the original ***Rocky***, Rocky Balboa thinks he can beat Apollo Creed. He trains and trains, and then he goes to the arena the night before, where he tells Mr Jurgens his shorts are the wrong color in the poster, to which Jurgens replies, "Don't worry, Rocky, I'm sure you're going to give everyone a great show." He realizes he's been set up. He can't possibly beat Creed, it's just a made-for-TV spectacle featuring a local fighter. He vows to "stay standing" for 15 rounds to prove he's "not just some bum from the neighborhood." By switching from offense to defense, he most likely saved himself from being knocked out. His new plan changes his character and achieves his new goal.

In ***Toy Story***, Woody's first goal is to get rid of Buzz, until he realizes that the bad boy Sid is destroying toys and must be stopped. The new plan is kept a secret from the audience.

In ***E.T.****, the Extraterrestrial,* Elliot's first goal is to keep E.T. as a friend; his second goal (minute 53 of 107) is to help him get home.

In ***Jurassic Park****,* Alan Grant's first goal is to verify the safety of the park; his second goal (minute 88 of 119) is to get Ellie and the kids to safety after he discovers the dinosaur eggs and the natural tendency for the dinosaurs to get out of control. More than that, his larger second goal is to *not* verify the safety of the park.

In ***Home Alone****,* Kevin's first goal was to get back together with his family; his second goal (minute 65 of 102) is to defeat the bad guys.

In ***The Return of the Jedi****,* Luke's first goal is to kill Darth Vader and thereby disable the new death star; his second goal (minute 112 of 125) is to kill the Emperor (with the help of his father). Note: death stars tend to be huge and spherical, so they have "normal" gravity inside for shooting scenes.

In ***Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom***, Claire's goal is to rescue the dinosaurs before the volcano erupts, only to learn that they are being turned into fighting machines and sold to governments and that must be stopped.

In ***The Fugitive****,* Richard Kimble's first goal is to find the one-armed man who killed his wife; his second goal (minute 88 of 124) is to expose his friend Charlie, who was trying to kill Richard in an effort to push Devlin MacGreggor's new drug, Provasic, through the FDA approval process, making him a rich man.

Similarly, in ***Monster's Inc***, Mike and Sully go after Boo, only to learn of the evil plan to capture kids and terrorize them (minute 64 of 85), and that the plan "goes all the way to the top."

In ***The Silence of the Lambs***, Clarice learns that Buffalo Bill is not committing random murders, he's sewing an outfit of human skin, which turns the plot and gives her the last clue she needs to find him.

In ***Angels and Demons***, Robert Langdon is searching for a murderer,

suspecting the Swiss Guards, only to learn that the camarlingo has murdered the Pope in his quest to become the next Pope and rule the Catholic faith.

In ***Chinatown***, Jake Gittes learns that Noah Cross has murdered Mulwray in his plan to create a desert oasis and get extremely rich.

In ***The Lion King,*** Simba's first goal is to forget about the past and live a life of ease; his second goal (minute 60 of 105) is to take his rightful place in the circle of life and be the alpha male.

In ***Batman,*** Bruce Wayne's first goal is to apprehend the Joker and take him to jail for his crimes; his second goal (minute 83 of 118) is to get revenge for the death of his parents by fighting the Joker to the death.

In ***Beverly Hills Cop,*** Axel's first goal is to find out who killed his friend Mike; his second goal (minute 77 of 99) is to bring down Victor Maitland's illegal arms-smuggling operation.

In ***Ghostbusters,*** Peter's first goal is to go after the ghosts and suck them into the containment vessel; his second goal (minute 72 of 99) is to close the door to the end of the world that the possessed Dana is guarding by eliminating her possessor, Gozer.

In ***Mrs Doubtfire,*** Daniel's first goal is to get his kids back by becoming Mrs Doubtfire; his second goal (minute 98 of 108) is to become the husband and father his wife and family need.

Do you see a pattern here? Going from local to global or temporary to long-term? If you understand this structure, as Aristotle did, you realize that the change of goal is the fulcrum of the film. Aristotle called the reversal "the revelation." It generally comes between minute 60 and 90. The Nine-Act structure is nothing more than a support structure for a strong reversal.

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Obstacles and Complications

In my world, there is at most one reversal per film. ***Nemo*** has no reversal. ***Casablanca*** has a huge reversal. As the story unfolds, there are obstacles

and complications.

An obstacle is something directly in the hero's path. Nemo meets some sharks and manages not to get eaten. ET drinks beer, get drunk, and Elliot falls asleep in class. Dorothy meets a cowardly lion on the road to Oz. It's easy to add and subtract obstacles and *whammos* (a term attributed to Fouad Said) — they are typically 4–6 pages long. You can pad the story with these, and generally they contribute to building the character, exploring the theme, or bringing out the subplot. They really aren't structural, they are shots of adrenaline with a chance to breathe in between. You should be able to add or take out an obstacle and not change the story at all.

A **complication** takes the character in a new direction while still in pursuit of his goal. In ***Toy Story***, Buzz jumps on the back of the station wagon and hitches a ride to the restaurant, so Woody has to follow him, and that's where they are grabbed by Sid, the evil boy. In ***Tomorrowland***, the house has been discovered — they have to destroy the house and blast out of there. In ***Cars***, Lightning McQueen tears up the street in Carburetor Springs and is forced to repave it. In ***Frozen***, when Elsa leaves to go to live on the mountain, Anna pursues her, leaving Hans in charge of the kingdom. That's not an obstacle, that's a plot complication. Complications move the plot forward. Without them, the story is weaker.

But — complications are second-order elements. If one doesn't work, use another. If you can think of a better way to develop character while putting tacks in front of your character, switch out. Don't be attached to obstacles and complications. They may be critical to character, but they aren't critical to the overall plot. If your script is six pages too long, hack out a complication and tweak the rest.

The Seeds of Conflict: Legitimate vs Illegitimate Reversals

If the reversal is the fulcrum of the plot, it has to be built properly. So to expand on the two-goal plot, we add a few more planks to the platform.

What is the bad guy's plan? Conflict is central to the plot of any story, and random or superficial conflict is not a driver. For big films, the scale is often global. The mastermind's plan is often world domination, or market domination, or ruling Gotham City, or something similar. I recently saw the play "Dear Evan Hansen," and in that play the antagonist and

protagonist are the same person, and the conflict comes when he randomly decides to tell a lie after a character dies. The backstory has nothing to do with it. This feels cheap for a reason — there is nothing at stake.

To have something at stake, both sides need legitimate and strong reasons to do what they are doing. Here we have *needs* and *plans*.

Most main characters have a **need**. A good bad guy has a strong need — often to prove his power over others, or to rule his own kingdom. Voldemort wants revenge over the system that spurned him (this is very common). Harry Potter's need is to right the wrongs that led to his parents' deaths and fulfill his destiny as the chosen one (also very common). The Joker wants to have his way with Gotham City. Scar wants to be king of the lion pride. Etc.

While both antagonists and protagonists have needs, it's the bad guy who always has a **plan**. If you want to write a screenplay, sit down with a blank piece of paper and ask yourself, "What is the bad guy's plan?" That is absolutely step one. It shows how he has been executing his plan for years to decades before the story opens. On page 1 or 2, we see the manifestation of this plan as it begins to roll into action after years of preparation. The "bones" of the story are made of the bad guy's plan. The bad guy's *need to execute his plan* is existential for him, and it drives the plot forward.

Top highlight

Once you have the overall plan, you figure out how the plan gets started, how it proceeds, how the protagonist gets sucked in, then how he discovers the plan via *the history lesson*, which gives him enough information to at least come up with a plausible plan for stopping the big bad thing from happening. Several unpredictable complications later, he manages to do it, but he generally doesn't need any more strategic information from that point on.

> The bad guy's need to execute his plan drives the plot forward.

The history lesson is usually 2–6 pages long and occurs on page 65–95. This part of the writing can be done in anywhere from a few hours to a few years.

The history lesson almost always comes at a time when the hero is in the worst shape, at the bottom of his luck, has been set up, and is often captive or in jail. He's usually in the deepest part of the mastermind's castle — the control room, the jail, dungeon, throne room, etc. It can be brief or a long narrative.

In Total Recall, the final clue falls into place when Quaid is in Cohagen's office and sees himself (Hauser) on the screen telling him he's been set up. He's been picking up breadcrumbs the entire time, and now he knows he's in a trap and has to get out. (That scene isn't online, sorry).

Here's a more expository style:

The Godfather: Meeting of the Five Families

That's a tough one, because determining who is the antagonist and who is the protagonist in ***The Godfather*** is an advanced exercise, but you can work it out if you know that this scene is the fulcrum of the film. Here's another classic-style history lesson:

Mr Incredible Learns the Truth

Wall*E: Directive A113

Often, the hero is captive and overhears the master plan. This is the classic scene from ***The General***, where Buster Keaton overhears the enemy plan:

The General under-the-table scene

> The “bones” of the story are made of the bad guy’s plan.

This is narrative structure: after the history lesson, everything makes sense. Here’s a semi-weak one, but it still works:

The Mask jail scene

In ***The Mask***, the history lesson *should really be about Tyrell, the crime boss, and his plan*. Instead, he learns some information from *after the story starts*, which makes for a very weak reversal. The scene motivates Stanley to go stop the bad thing from happening, but it could have been stronger. A good coverage person should flag a weak reversal like this. ***Gremlins*** has one of the weakest ones I know:

Gremlins history lesson

This is a history lesson, but it has nothing to do with the main conflict. It explains nothing, it just seemed to Spielberg and Dante like a good idea to stick an emotional history lesson in before the comeback. That's called an illegitimate reversal.

The ***Animal House*** faux history lesson is a classic example of how to turn a plot that has no real bad guy and all the conflict is trivial. Note the historical references because — well, because some kind of history lesson just seems right, but it has no bearing on the actual plot:

Animal House speech

You would think writers could do better than that, but it's fairly common to see a faux history lesson or the message "winners never quit" or some such bromide trying to patch up a weak story line and a lousy antagonist (Stephen Spielberg specializes in this, in fact). You need something to come between the failure of Act 5 and the comeback of Act 7, so any old history lesson will do. Here's a better one:

Big — Josh goes back to his old neighborhood

In ***Big***, the antagonist isn't the Zoltar machine and its maker. The antagonist is Josh, who wanted to be someone else, because he wasn't happy being a young teenager. That's why this scene, which reveals information from just before the movie started, actually does turn the story legitimately. It's not the strongest reversal, because there's no bad guy planning and toiling for years ahead of time, but if the antagonist and the protagonist are the same person (not the same persona), you can turn the story by explaining why he headed for the false goal in the first place. This scene is enough for Josh to want to go back, which he does, with the help of the Zoltar machine. Becoming big was the false goal. Technically, it's weak because there isn't a good bad guy. But it works for a fish-out-of-water comedy.

Casablanca might have the best reversal of all time, watch for the revelation of information from the back story:

Casablanca: I Still Love You

After that, there is a montage in which she tells him everything and says he'll have to think for all of them now. Remarkably — and this is a huge exception in the canon of the Nine-Act Structure — their time in Paris was only about 18 months ago, not ten years, but in the context of the war

that was a lifetime. Here are my notes from that part of the film:

79	-2		Rick and Carl discuss the café. They can afford to stay closed for 2-3 weeks, keeps everyone on salary. Rick goes upstairs. He turns on the light and she is there. She had to see him. She asks him to put his feelings aside. Rick says "Do I have to hear what a great man your husband is, what an important cause he's fighting for?" She says it was his cause, too. "I'm the only cause I'm fighting for."
80	-3		She said if you knew what really happened, if you only knew the truth. He says "You'd say anything now to get what you want." She says he's being selfish, coward, weak. She cries and says she's sorry. He's his last hope. Victor will die in Casablanca.
81	-4		She points a gun at him. Says he wants the letters. He steps up to her and says shoot.
82		2	She says "Richard, I tried to stay away. I thought I would never see you again. And you were out of my life." she drops the gun, falls into his arms. "The day you left Paris, if you knew what I went through. If you knew how much I loved you. How much I still love you." They kiss.
83		3	Fade to dark and fade back in. She's been talking to him about the past for a few hours or so. She's telling him the whole story, Victor was taken to a concentration camp. News came that he had been shot dead trying to escape. Victor wanted her to keep their marriage a secret, to protect her. Not even their friends knew. Just before they were to leave Paris, a friend told her Victor was alive and hiding outside Paris. He was sick, he needed her. She knew if she'd told him he wouldn't have left Paris and the Gestapo would have caught him, so she kept it a secret and let him go.
84		4	Rick says "What about now?" She says "I know I'll never have the strength to leave you now." She says she can't fight it anymore, she can't run away from him again. "I don't know what's right any longer. You have to think for both of us. For all of us." He says "All right, I will." She says "I wish I didn't love you so much."

An *illegitimate reversal* is one where the protagonist's goal changes for any reason other than learning the bad guy's long-incubating and unfolding plan.

Sometimes, the hero and the antagonist are the same, as in ***Groundhog Day***. In this case, it's helpful to think of this person having two personas working against each other, and the "good" one can learn that the bad one has been screwing up his life all this time. There are several variants of this, but the story turns on realizing what a jerk he has been all his life.

Some films, like ***Apollo 13***, ***Cast Away***, ***Forrest Gump***, or ***The Martian*** simply have no antagonist. In this case, it's a fight/race against time, mechanical problems, setbacks, weather, and luck. It's possible to pull this off with great characters, famous actors, and a relevant premise, but I would say it's also much more risky at the box office. That's why most exploratory adventures have a team member who turns out to be the bad guy and whose plan has been to take over the ship or somehow hijack the mission. In ***Back to the Future***, the bad guy is Biff, who threatens Marty's very existence — this is much more satisfying than going up against physics and weather.

In ***Jaws***, the antagonist is a shark. Sharks don't make plans! The only way to turn this story is to figure out some mechanical way to defeat the shark, but it's not nearly as satisfying as foiling bad guys. In the ***Jurassic Park*** series, there's always a person and a plan; the dinosaurs are there to make it more dangerous and visual, but the real conflict is human.

I didn't start this essay with the nine acts. The nine acts simply support a legitimate reversal. So it's not a complex construction. Rather, the nine acts are required to pull off the reversal properly. I'm not married to the number nine — I'm married to the history lesson.

The Nine-Act Structure Overview

A legitimate reversal changes the protagonist's goal and makes the film much more interesting right at the 2/3 point. This is the recipe for conflict that isn't predictable. Here is the visual overview:

Act 0: Someone Toils Deep into the Night
Act 1: Open with An Establishing Shot
Act 2: Something Bad/Mysterious Happens
Act 3: Meet the Hero
Act 4: Commitment
Act 5: Go for the Wrong Goal
Act 6: Reversal
Act 7: Go for the New Goal
Act 8: Resolution

> The Nine-Act structure is nothing more than a support structure for a strong reversal.

Film Time vs Story Time

The majority of feature films run100–110 minutes. The story may play out over weeks, months, years, decades. But there's a remarkable consistency in storytelling: the story most often plays out inside of two weeks:

I give the analogy of the Olympics — participants spend millions of hours in preparation for decades, all of which comes together for two weeks to create a show with a beginning, middle, and end. Because audiences don't want to see too many goodnights and good mornings, filmmakers try not to have that overhead get in the way. Many films play out over the course of 3–6 days, many go up to a few weeks, to account for travel, falling in love, schedules, events, etc. A month is not uncommon. Longer requires montages and can still work well. Plenty of films cover an entire school year. Sometimes there are great leaps forward in time, but generally that doesn't change the structure.

Story time is far less than the history of the conflict, and audiences generally don't want to see huge gaps in the timeline unless they somehow improve the story. So Act 0 is usually ten years long, and acts 1–8 all together are most often 4–14 days.

With that set-up, let's dive into each act …

Act 0: Someone Toils Deep into the Night

Somewhere around 80 percent of all bad guys work on their plan for at least ten years. Eight is short, thirty is long, and some toil away or lie in wait for hundreds of years until they are ready to spring into action. All this happens before the film starts.

For example, why are the ***Star Wars*** series engines of death always spherical, planet-sized space constructions? Because that gives you 1G of gravity inside. What has to be at the core of this man-made planet? Something supermassive, to create the artificial gravity. How long does it take to construct a small planet out of concrete and metal? (Note: magically there is also 1G of gravity inside all spacecraft in the film, which blows the physics.)

It takes time to cook up a good plan and be ready to execute it. Think about real-life crimes — the more serious the crime, the longer it took to plan. If the story is going to have some degree of scale, it will take a while to prepare.

In many conflicts, there is a *seminal incident* that put the bad guy on his path. It's very often when someone who is enthusiastic and capable gets passed over for a chance to prove himself, so he goes deep into his bad-guy hideout, builds his power, and doesn't come out until he's ready. Other times it's a random event, an accident, a lost love, etc.

The seminal incident is the thing the protagonist *doesn't* learn during the time he's going for the wrong goal. He learns it in the history lesson. In this light, we can clearly see that ***Star Wars*** is a linear plot — all the information we need is already stored in R2D2's memory. The new information is tactical, not motivational.

The antagonist's history lesson answers the question *why*? Why is the bad guy bad? Why is he doing what he's doing? Why is he so good at it? Why has he started now? The goal of the Nine-Act Structure is to put each person on screen for a legitimate reason.

What to look for: The distinction between backstory and biography. Make sure to distinguish between *prehistory* — the general background of the place and time, *biography* — personal histories that add dimension to the characters, and *true backstory* — the story of the main conflict. Too many stories start with an impactful scene and then dissolve to "Ten years later …" — a sign that the filmmakers don't have a handle on structure.

Act 1: Open with an establishing shot

Watch movies and you'll see it over and over. It's often a crane, helicopter, or some kind of outside-in shot. It's very rare that the action just starts without this. A favorite of mine:

American Beauty opening shot

I know there's a little expository shocker in there ahead of time, but the helicopter shot and narrative set the tone.

To save time, many pictures put the Act 1 wider picture behind the credits, so the film can start in the location of Act 2.

Working girl establishing shot

Length: Act 1 is often less than a minute.

What to look for: A crane shot or outside-in shot.

Act 2: Something Bad Happens

This is the beginning of the unfolding of the bad guy's plan. It's almost always on the bad guy's terms — he chooses the time and place. It rarely involves the protagonist, it's just the first event of more to come. Jurassic Park provides a classic example, giving a taste of what is yet to come:

Jurassic Park Act 2

Note there is no Act 1, just the words “Isla Nublar” overlaid on the scene, and it works just fine.

In Avatar, the narrator tells us his brother was killed, and we see a body in a box. That’s all. For a classic Act Two, we can see The Dark Knight Rises:

Dark Knight opener

Note: “It doesn’t matter who we are. What matters is our plan.”

Here’s a good one:

Despicable Me opener

Sometimes it’s not really bad, it’s just something mysterious:

Jumanji opener

Inglorious Basterds opens with a long but classic and tension-building Act Two:

Inglourious Basterds chilling opener

Act Twos can vary quite a bit, from a narrative approach to flashbacks to weaving it into the hero's current life. But in many cases, you'll see something bad or mysterious happen that foreshadows what's to come but doesn't involve the protagonist.

Occasionally, the second act shows something bad from the future, followed by a message saying "X Days Earlier," and then the story begins. While this worked well in **1973**, it's a cheap way to start a story nowdays (***Lego Batman*** team, are you listening?). Use sparingly.

Obviously, an illegitimate Act Two would be something randomly bad

happening, or something good, or just a character-based scene, not the beginning of the conflict. Here's a good way to get a story started:

Blue Velvet ear find

It's unusual, because the protagonist discovers the ear, which goes against the Nine-Act recipe, but it obviously works well in ***Blue Velvet***. Here's one that might look legitimate but isn't:

Lawrence of Arabia opener

This is the kind of biographical material that should be woven into the main story. It's not the place to start. The script is based on the biography of T.E. Lawrence, who naturally started his book this way, but adding it at the beginning made the movie unnecessarily longer. Movies aren't books. When adapting an existing story, look for the first incident that foreshadows the actual conflict.

Lara Croft, Tomb Raider (2018) starts with an exposition about her father, then we see her defeated in the fighting ring, *then* the story begins. You don't need all this character work at the beginning of a story, just get it going and weave it in as you go.

Witness starts with a funeral, then Samuel witnesses a murder in a train station bathroom. The murder is one of a string of murders that will lead John Book to uncover corruption deep in the police department. Peter Weir probably could have cut that and improved the film, because it's Act 5 where we see the strange world the hero must enter.

Length: Act 2 is usually around 5 minutes long, no more than 8.

What to look for: A jolt of action. An incident that is seemingly unrelated to the protagonist and requires more investigation.

Act 3: Meet the Hero

Who is going to fix the problem? Someone who has an unfulfilled need and who just happens to be related to the problem. Seeing Luke Skywalker at home, Indiana Jones teaching, and Rocky collecting debts establishes both a basis for a normal life and the qualifications for extraordinary performance. We learn her *need,* even if she happens to be lazy, drunk, or unmotivated.

Yet something has happened. Something must be done.

The hero is not the right person for the job. Sometimes, the hero aspires to be the right person, other times she doesn't. Something has to be done, but she's not convinced it should be her. The hero often *refuses the call*, because on short notice she sees no reason to upend her life to solve a mystery. She says forget it, you've got the wrong person, I would *never* do that.

To counteract the refusal of the call, Act 3 typically has three *bumps*, during which the protagonist accelerates down the tracks toward the take-off point. Each bump puts the protagonist one rung higher on the ladder that leads to the diving board of act 4. I often say "Three bumps and a push," to help people envision what it takes to get your protagonist over the edge and into the water with the bad guys.

A legitimate act two buys about fifteen minutes of character development before the hero commits to her first goal at around minute 20. In ***Saving***

Private Ryan, Captain Miller takes the assignment immediately, because it's his job to do so. In ***Finding Nemo***, it takes Nemo several dares and "bumps" until Nemo is finally scooped up and in the boat of the fish collectors.

In ***Seven***, Detective Somerset is determined to retire and only commits to solving the string of murders when he realizes he is needed.

In ***Spiderman***, Peter Parker goes through many small bumps fighting petty thieves until he realizes that MJ likes Spiderman, at which point he commits to crimefighting.

In ***The Matrix***, we see the classic Nine-Act structure at work. Here is Act 3 with Act 4 at the end (minute 29); you can see the bumps at minutes 12, 14, 19, and 24:

7			Neo, programmer, is asleep. Computer screen says "Wake up, Neo." It says "The Matrix has you… follow the white rabbit."
8			Troy comes. He's with a group of people, they are late. They have the money. He gives them a disc. He says not to disclose him if they get caught.
9			Troy says Neo looks a little white, he should unplug. Neo says he has work tomorrow. The girl says come with them. She has a white rabbit tattoo on her shoulder. He says he'll go. Cut to: wild club scene. Trinity comes to him, knows his name, introduces herself.
10			Trinity knows about Neo. Neo says she helped infiltrate the IRS database - she's a well-known hacker. He thought she was a guy. She wrote the message to him. She says he is in danger. She says they are watching him. She knows what he's been doing, why he hardly sleeps.
11			She says he's looking for "him." She says she used to do the same thing. "It's the question that drives us. It's the question that brought you here." The question: What is the Matrix? She says it will find him if he wants it to.
12			Cut to: next day, he's late for work. His boss says that he has a problem with authority. He works for one of the top software companies in the world. Boss says the time has come to make a choice - be at your desk on time, or find another job.
13			He's now at his desk. Gets a delivery. It's a cell phone and it rings. He answers. It's Morpheus. "I don't know if you're ready to see what I have to show you, but we're running out of time. They're coming for you and I don't know what they're going to do."
14			Morph says stand up slowly and look - he sees agents. Morph says go. He is guided by Morph.
15			Morph guides him down the rows of cubicles, to an office, to a safety platform for window washing. He says it's the platform or in the custody or agents.
16			Neo goes toward the platform, but it's dangerous. He loses the cell phone. Can't do it.
17			We see agents taking him out. Trinity sees them and swears. She takes off. Cut to: Neo is in a holding room. Agents come in. They have a file on him. Smith looks at the file - it's thick.
18			Smith says Neo is also a hacker and is guilty of many computer crimes. Smith wants Neo's help. Neo has been contacted by Morpheus.
19			Smith says Morpheus is the most dangerous man alive. Smith is willing to give Neo a fresh start if he'll cooperate in bringing Morpheus to justice. Neo says no. Says he knows his rights. He wants his phone call.
20			Smith says "What good is a phone call if you're unable to speak?" Neo's mouth grows shut! His lips disappear! Agents force him on the table, say he's going to help them.
21			Smith puts an electronic crayfish into Neo's bellybutton - it crawls in as he struggles. He wakes up in a sweat - it's been a bad dream. The phone rings.
22			Morph says "This line is tapped, so I'll make it brief. They underestimated how important you are. "You are the One, Neo. You may have spent the last few years of your life looking for me, but I've spent my entire life looking for you." Tells him to go to the Adams St bridge. Neo goes - it's raining. Trinity comes in a car and he gets in.
23			A blond girl points a gun at him. Trinity says to trust her. Tells him to take off his shirt.
24			She takes out a big machine, says he's bugged. She uses the machine to extract the bug, which is wriggling inside him. She zaps it and gets it.
25			Trinity drops the bug out the window of the moving car. They arrive at an apartment building, go upstairs. Trinity says Morph knows more than he can imagine. They go in, meet Morph.
26			They shake hands. He says "I imagine that right now, you feel a bit like Alice, tumbling down the rabbit hole. … Do you believe in Fate, Neo?" Neo says no.
27			Morph says he's here because he knows something. He says Neo has felt there's something wrong with the world. Does he want to know what the Matrix is? Morph says the Matrix is everywhere.
28			Morph says the Matrix is the world that has been pulled over his eyes. He says Neo is a slave like everyone else, born into bondage. He says Neo has to see it for himself. He takes out two pills.
29			He holds them out: "You take the blue pill and wake up in your bed. You take the red pill, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes." Neo takes the red pill, swallows. Morph says follow me.

This is also the time to meet the opposing team. While we may have seen some of their work in act two, it is during this setup-period that we often meet the *front man*, who does the dirty work of the *mastermind*. Darth Vader is a classic front man. If we meet the mastermind in this act, we rarely find out he is bad, but we usually understand how powerful he is. In ***The Fugitive***, Charlie the mastermind is Richard's friend, while the

front man, Sykes, looks like the villain.

Length: Act 3 is 4 to 8 minutes long.

What to look for: The hero's need and the refusal of the call. Dorothy's need is to satisfy her desire to explore the world beyond the farm. Luke needs to be part of the resistance, not a farmer. Rocky needs to prove himself. This act must lead up to act 4, so it needs to be carefully constructed.

Act IV: Commitment

Most stories have a pretty sharp commitment point. Remember that in most Nine-Act stories, the protagonist commits to the *false* goal. In ***The Lion King***, Scar and the hyenas convince Simba to run away from his family and community. In ***Casablanca***, Rick commits to learning why Elsa left him in Paris. In ***The Fugitive***, Richard shaves his beard and commits to finding the man who killed his wife. In ***Mrs Doubtfire***, "she" accepts the job offer. In ***The Incredibles***, Bob takes the job working for Mirage. In ***Alice in Wonderlan***d, she dives down the hole after the rabbit. In ***Avatar***, Jake promises to help Colonel Quaritch by giving him intelligence on the Na'vi.

The Matrix's red pill/blue pill scene is about as good as it gets for commitment.

The Matrix Red Pill/Blue Pill

The two keys about Act 4: 1) there is a cost, and 2) there can be no going back. You should be able to articulate both. It's practically impossible to find a plot where the commitment point isn't crystal clear, but it is possible

to find stories with weak commitment, where the protagonist could go back if he wanted to.

Length: Act 4 is 10–15 minutes long. It can be shorter, but that's rare.

What to look for: Three bumps. A good reason the protagonist can't turn back.

Act 5: Go For the Wrong Goal

It should be obvious to the audience that the hero is now going for the right goal, doing the right thing. If a murder has been committed, the obvious thing to do is find the murderer and bring him to justice. In most cases, the bad guy drives this act, and the hero is on his heels. In ***Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid***, they keep saying "Wow, those guys are good. Who *are* those guys?" In ***Total Recall***, Quaid keeps seeing videos he himself left to guide him from one whammo to the next. The hero is playing a game of catch-up, and quality information is scarce. Most often, the front man does the dirty work during Act 5, while the mastermind remains behind the scenes until Act 6.

Act 5 is 40–60 pages. In my view, it has nothing to do with Sid Field's act two, though people often confuse them. During Act 5, the director is busy showing off the premise of the film with set pieces …

Fatboy Slim dance scene

… while the protagonist is busy uncovering bits of backstory that help him learn what's really going on. He's always a minute too late to every whammo …

Angels and Demons murder whammo

Generally, each new clue reveals information from *further back in time before the story started*.

I call them breadcrumbs. The hero picks up breadcrumbs as he goes, often with no idea how they will figure in later:

The Game — picking up breadcrumbs

Even though the hero can be back on her heels in this act, she can still have fun. In a fish-out-of-water story, this act is where much of the fun is (e.g., dancing on a huge piano in ***Big,*** exploring new territory and meeting new bugs in **A *Bugs' Life***, living as an Amish in ***Witness***). In a grand adventure story, this is the hero's journey into the great unknown, where he comes of age and learns, but always at his expense, because the bad guy is always out in front.

This is where the fish is out of the water:

Splash — fish out of water

Look for set pieces:

Big FAO Schwarz piano scene

Most of the material of the trailer comes from this act:

Elektra trailer

He’s behind, he’s being watched, he’s back on his heels:

Jack Ryan — hotel-room assault

In many stories, the protagonist is trying to solve a mystery during this act. There is often a series of crimes the hero can't quite prevent, and each one delivers a new clue:

Clarice gets a clue after autopsy

In the Harry Potter series, Rowling uses the memory vials to take Harry back into the past and reveal information he needs:

Harry Potter — memory of Dumbledore meeting young Tom Riddle

Length: Act 5 is generally around 30–45 minutes long, but in some cases it's as many as 60.

What to look for: The hero in a new world, out of his element. This act is

where most of the trailer comes from, so you need set pieces that define the story here. The revelation of backstory information in bits and pieces. Flashbacks. The *creature in the forest,* who aids the protagonist with cryptic clues and signs. The *henchman*, who is not the real antagonist, only the servant of the mastermind. Discoveries and complications but no turning point. Entering the lair of the dragon, the deepest point of enemy territory. Jail or capture. Failure.

> Generally, each new clue reveals information from further back in time before the story started.

Act 6: The Reversal

The final puzzle piece falls into place …

The general pattern is that the oldest piece of information is revealed in the history lesson, which tells the tale of the seminal incident:

The seminal incident from Batman revealed in a flashback

Mr Incredible created Syndrome

It can be a flashback, but it's often simply in the form of "Before I kill ya', I'm going to tell ya' what happened, why I'm doing this, and how it's going to work, so you can see how brilliant I am." We've seen many examples above. Here's a memorable one, after Truman has already been wondering what's going on for some time:

Truman Show reversal

Note that *Truman's reversal comes at the end of the film!* There is no Act 7 or Act 8 — they take place off screen. *The film is almost all Act 5!* Syd Field would say this film has a three-act structure, but if you use my tool you will understand how this story actually works.

The same is true for ***Ender's Game***. Ender achieves the false goal, then he goes alone into the Formic's den to get a short history lesson — that the Formics aren't really so bad and he's just destroyed their race, and conveniently their only living pupa is right there for him to take off and find a new home for. The movie ends at the beginning of Act 7, but the history lesson could have been better.

Act six usually takes place in *the deepest part of the enemy's territory*. In The Mask, Stanley is in jail; in Cohagen's office, Quaid learns from Hauser he's been set up; it's in the golden hall of Smaug, the dragon, where Bilbo learns the dragon's weakness; in the General, Buster Keaton is under the table of the Confederate officers planning their attack. Many times, he's held captive in the evil mastermind's fortress. At this point, it's clear that he has been set up, he's been pursuing the wrong goal, and he must turn the tables. It's all because the history lesson drops the last piece of the puzzle into place.

Here's one of my favorite legitimate history lessons:

Ghostbusters — Evo Shandor story

This one is awesome:

Lego Movie history lesson

The Lego Movie reversal ties the real world and the Lego world together beautifully. Perhaps my favorite of all time is the turning point in ***The Fugitive***. The scene isn't online, but it's in my notes at minute 91:

85			Richard at pay phone calls next man on list - no answer. Richard walks in neighborhood, sees cops outside the apartment of Fredrick Sykes.
86			Richard climbs roof, sees cops staking out the home of a one-armed man. He breaks glass and gets in thru window.
87		1	Richard searches, sees name: Fredrick Sykes, sees photo, remembers the guy. Sees arm, remembers it. Goes to desk.
88		1	Desk drawer: pulls out photos of Sykes with Devlin Macgregor employee Alec Lentz.
89		2	He sees pay stubs to Sykes from Devlin Macgregor. He remembers operating on a patient. Richard: "This guy is bleeding from every needle puncture. You say Lentz sent this guy in?" Another doctor says yeah, the patient is on Lentz's RDU-90 program, a study for a new drug to prevent heart disease called Provasic. Richard says "The new wonder drug boys, clean out those arteries and put us all out of business." Then he has a realization. Sam's group studies news reports from parade.
90		1	Phone call comes in, "Another guy claiming to be Richard Kimble." Sam takes it. Richard says "Do you remember what I said to you in the tunnel?" Sam says "Yeah, I think you said something like you didn't kill your wife." Richard: "Do you remember what you said to me?" Sam says "I remember you were pointing my gun at me." Richard: "You said, 'I don't care.'" They are trying to locate him, say he's on the south side.
91			Sam says "Yeah, Richard, I don't care. I'm not trying to solve a puzzle here." Cosmo: "Five seconds to location." Richard: "Well I am trying to solve a puzzle. And I just found a big piece." Richard puts the phone down and DOESN'T hang up. Richard walks away, they get the location and send men. Richard runs. Then there's a montage of experts going through Sykes' apartment, taking prints, etc.
92			Gerard looks at the photos Richard was looking at. Sykes comes home to a group of cops. Sykes comes in, Sam is in the kitchen.
93			Sam tells Sykes that Kimble made a phone call from his apartment. He says he went through all of this a year ago, he wasn't in Chicago that night. He was on a business trip. He works for Devlin Macgreggor, he handles security for all the top executives.
94			Sam looks at photos, asks if Kimble went on the trip, says "Jeez, that's a big fish. Sam turns away from him to give Sykes a chance to be himself. Sykes says "You don't see him in the picture, do ya?" Sam turns back around, realizes Sykes is lying. They exit, Sam says "Cosmo, this guy's dirty."

The turning point in The Fugitive

From this point on: a) Richard is looking for *the man who hired the man* who killed his wife, and b) Gerard can no longer *not* care. The story has turned from solving a murder case to solving a major crime against surgery patients and bringing those responsible to justice. Both the protagonist and the cop character change their goals on that single discovery of information from the past (Sykes is the henchman, Charlie is the mastermind).

The key to a good reversal is compactness. Most of the breadcrumbs should have been picked up already. It's just the last thing that has to fall into place for everything to make sense, and we finally learn the bad guy's motivation. If there's a mastermind, he could be revealed or confronted in this scene, but not defeated. He is at the height of his power. He is about to execute the plan he has been dreaming about for so many years. Only one thing can stop him — a hero who knows what's actually going on for a change.

At the end of this act, which typically takes 4–8 minutes, the hero may or may not know what to do next. She is no longer on her back foot, but she

now has to drive toward the solution, usually by escaping the trap first.

Length: Act 6 is usually around 5–8 minutes long.

What to look for: The story or flashback of the seminal incident. The oldest bit of backstory. Everything stopping so the hero can learn the history lesson.

Act 7: Go for the New Goal

The new goal is clear. The path to the new goal is anything but. The way out of the immediate situation may be clear, or it may be improvised. Very often, there is a secret — a few people whisper to each other what they need to do, and they put their secret plan in motion.

Very often, the first part of Act 7 is a montage of people working on the new plan. This montage generally shows them working feverishly against the ticking clock. It shows that they are getting ready but doesn't fully disclose the plan.

This act is also called *the comeback*. The hero is probably starting off in an inferior position, but the nemesis no longer has his built-in advantage. Now it's a struggle, and the two are evenly matched. There must be the threat of real death for both sides as this epic battle to save the (toys, whales, dinosaurs, cars, city, world) unfolds.

In the world of three-act structure, this act unwinds or resolves the conflict that was built up in act two. In my view, that doesn't properly manage the flow of information that changes the protagonist's goal. You can unwind or resolve pretty much any conflict, but that doesn't make it believable to the audience. In my world, Act 6 is another one-way door, a second commitment, and there's no chance to go back. Everything is now on the line and the hero *must* act.

The most important thing about Act 7 is that it almost never goes according to plan:

Chicken Run Final Escape

There is often a contraption or a sequence of events that has to go just right:

Back to the Future car escape 88 mph

In many cases, it's mano-a-mano between the hero and the mastermind:

Terminator final fight scene

Sometimes you need a new idea:

Croods final scene

Often, an important character is thought dead, then he comes back to life:

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows final fight scene

Sometimes, the ranger character, an unallied freelancer (think Han Solo or Aragorn) whom we had forgotten about, comes back out of nowhere to help. Often, an important secondary character dies. There is almost always a ticking clock:

Aladdin final fight

The ticking clock is usually set during Act 6 or early in Act 7. The ticking clock is usually set for 3–5 minutes. It could be water rising in a submerged van, walls closing in, air running out, etc. It's always easy to tell how much time the hero has to succeed or die trying. The audience usually sees quite a lot of the clock, and for some reason they always believe the clock could run out before the hero manages to get out of her jam.

The hero is tested severely. He has to use his wits. He has to get a little lucky. Yet he emerges victorious in the end, often miraculously, almost always with some unexpected help:

Star Wars (1977): Han Solo joins the fight

Then of course, there's always double crossing and Deus Ex Machina:

Toy Story 3 Final Battle

It’s always personal:

Lion King Final Scene

Sometimes you just have to do what has to be done:

The Graduate Final Scene

Act 7 is usually the most expensive act to shoot, so build it up and pay it off. Make it visual. Here you can pay off previous easter eggs that result in nice surprises without spending a lot of money (remember ***The World According to Garp***?). Don't change locations too much, just keep it interesting and use special effects to dazzle between set pieces. In many cases, this sequence takes place on top of a high building or in a very dangerous/industrial setting with lots of physical danger, usually involving gravity:

True Lies Final Scene

In a non-adventure story, the protagonist is changed. He's learned his lesson. He has the information he needs to be a different person and the comeback is every bit as sweet:

Pretty Woman Knight on White Horse scene

Whether it's by fighting, outsmarting, escaping, or just changing his ways, the hero prevents the bad outcome and conquers. The worst kind of Act 7 is when the hero undoes the mess he has caused simply by unwinding it and apologizing. The best kind is when he is truly changed and his need is now met.

Length: Act 7 is almost always the most expensive. It is generally 10 to 15 minutes long.

What to look for: Action. Possibly a montage early on to show preparing the new plan. A secret plan the audience doesn't know. A ticking clock. The see-saw between a credible defeat and an unlikely comeback.

Act 8: Resolution

This act should be mercifully short. No more than four pages. There may be some awards to give, some people to hug and thank, some sacrifices to mourn, talismans to return, rituals to perform, and home to go back to, but it's okay to leave the audience wanting more. Just boil it down to one final scene that gets most of it done and then …

FADE OUT

Summary

In essence, the Nine Act Structure manages the flow of information in a film — what the protagonist learns and what the audience learns — to answer all the *why* questions. The nine acts fall into place naturally to support a two-goal plot. In a film with a linear plot and a single goal, you'll still see seven acts, because these basic building blocks contribute to a well crafted story. There aren't many alternatives, really. The more you study films, the more you will see seven or nine acts, with very few exceptions.

My premise is that there are only three kinds of structures:

- **One goal** (we know everything we need to know at the beginning)
- **Two goal** (there's a spectrum of reversals, from weak to strong)
- **Shit happens** until it's time to fade out (generally driven by character or premise — I call this a "Nein-Act Structure," and it's extremely rare: ***Shrek, Forrest Gump***)

The second goal is generally bigger in scope and importance. It's precisely because the audience can't see the second goal coming that the Nine-Act Structure has survived since Ancient Greece. I predict it will be with us as long as audiences enjoy being entertained for 90 to 120 minutes at a time.

Discussion

The Nine-Act Structure answers the question *Why*? Why is this happening? Why him? Why are all the characters doing what they are doing? When you have good answers for the why questions, the audience finds the story believable and they want to get involved.

There are many small films that either don't use the history lesson at all or do it in their own way. In ***Three Billboards outside of Ebbing, Missouri***, the bad guy — Sheriff Willoughby — is bad because he's lazy, not because he has a plan. So the heroine drives the plot. That's rare, but there are many interesting variations among smaller films. The bigger the budget, the more likely you'll see a legitimate reversal, because that's what (unconsciously) gets through the green-light process.

Many bad things happen in the real world. There is much drama. There are stock-market crashes, divorces, car accidents, people get cancer, there is gun violence, and there are all kinds of nasty headlines. You can

imagine writing a script inspired by all kinds of stories.

But. And this is a biiiiig but.

If no bad guy is planning his action for ten years, it won't be a story that works in a theater. It won't be worth putting a lot of money behind. Producers won't jump on it. In every Quentin Tarrantino film, every Cohen Brothers film, every Martin Scorsese film, every Jim Cameron film, the bad guy has been working on it for ten years.

I've heard people criticize the structure as being formulaic and prescriptive. This is a misunderstanding. The few who spend time with this tool understand it as being far more helpful than the standard three acts. There is an infinite variety of ways to modify it, stretch it, and bend it — as I have shown here. Break it if you want to! But if you break it, you should have a good reason, because doing so could limit the size of your audience.

What about prologues and epilogues? I think of these as naive additions that first-time writers stick on to their stories, probably to increase the page count. In ***Dances with Wolves***, there's a long scene at the beginning where Dunbar shows his bravery, but it has nothing to do with the plot. First-time writers seem to tack on more endings, just because they can. An experienced writer leaves them crying and rolls the credits.

Several films are very complex and hard to analyze. I can think of ***Inception***, ***Titanic***, ***Memento***, ***The Wizard of Oz***, ***Curious Case of Benjamin Button***, ***Cloud Atlas***, etc. Almost all of these have story-within-story, where each character has two separate roles (or more). The only way to analyze these is to write down the minutes and go through the process. My general approach is *recursive* — treat each separate story as having its own cast and its own reversal and see if that helps. It's possible to make different assumptions and come up with different analyses for complex films. I would love to do more formal research on this but don't have time.

What about novels? Since a novel is an open-ended container, novel writers have more freedom to add more goals. It would be interesting to study novels in the way I've done for films. My prediction is that you would see very few linear novels, a lot of two-goal stories, and several three, four, and perhaps even five-goal stories. It's still the Nine-Act Structure, but with multiple false goals and turning points, until you get

to the final Act 6 and everything becomes clear and the hero prevails in the end (or dies trying). I'm not confident that this model of multiple false goals actually describes the vast majority of novels. It's a hypothesis. But I'm pretty confident that at least half of all popular novels use the same two-goal, nine-act structure I have outlined, as in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, Platoon, The World According to Garp, Harry Potter*, etc. Act 5 can go for hundreds of pages in a serious novel.

What about stage plays? My exposure here is purely anecdotal, but I understand plays better by looking at them through this lens, and I see plenty of history lessons at the beginning of what is traditionally called Act 3 of a play. It would be very interesting to analyze both plays and novels using my tool.

As one example, Dear Evan Hansen has absolutely no structural backstory. Something happens at the beginning that sets everything going, but it's just a random event, there is really no antagonist with a prior motivation, just some depression driving a jump out of a tree. At intermission, I told the person sitting next to me this is called "nothing at stake." He was pissed, because I ruined the entire story for him by exposing the meaninglessness of the plot.

Why No One Talks About This

The Nine-Act Structure based around the history lesson that provides a legitimate reversal has been understood since Aristotle, but it hasn't been properly formalized. People just feel it intuitively *on top of* the traditional three-act structure. Studio executives will hand back notes saying it doesn't feel right, it's the timing, something is off in the second act, the story is too predictable, etc. They "know it when they see it," because "it works."

Audiences don't remember the history lessons. After a film with a strong reversal, people will see it as a single story with a beginning, middle, and end. The actual reversal is a fairly quiet scene that mostly gets overshadowed by what comes next. It's not action, so it doesn't stay in memory.

John Lasseter, director and producer of so many amazing Pixar feature films, has an intuitive feel for the structure of films. I know John a bit. He's much more intuitive than analytical. I don't think he goes into meetings asking for a legitimate history lesson on page 75. I think he's

looking for emotion, complexity, depth, surprise, misdirection, characters doing the opposite of what they say, nuance, and good reasons for each character to be in each scene. I think John has only made one linear film (***Nemo***); the rest have had the full nine acts.* Here's the reversal from The Princess and the Frog. It's in two parts, this is the second (minute 72):

Princess Tiana Party

Writers find their way to the Nine-Act Structure intuitively without the tool I have developed, because it simply "works."

> The Nine-Act Structure based around the history lesson that provides a legitimate reversal has been understood since Aristotle, but it hasn't been properly formalized.

How to Use the Nine-Act Structure

Take a rigorous approach to writing. Don't feel your way through the process. I've seen too many writers not understand how to edit their material, and they go back and forth, throwing out important structural parts so they can save their darling dialogue or funny bits. Here are my suggestions; feel free to use, abuse, or ignore them …

Films aren't shot in script order, nor should scripts be written in story

order. Use a more agile approach to writing and you'll end up throwing away much less material. What you need before you even start writing is a good act 0 and a good act 6. Bring me those, and I can put a strong script together. Do it this way, and you will be able to write one or two scripts more per year.

Put the bones down first. You should be able to summarize your nine acts on a single piece of paper. A strong story is built around a good bad guy.

Next, work on the backstory. Put all the clues in and really develop the antagonist's motivation. Get into his head. Understand why the story starts when it does and how that leads to the unfolding of the bad guy's plan. Be the bad guy for a month or two while you're doing this. Think about your mastermind and what he needs to build and how long it will take him to do that. Storyboard it. Timeline it. *Then* figure out who your hero is. Once you are happy with Act 0, you're ready to begin writing the story (but not the script).

Next, write a treatment of 3–10 pages. Number each act. Get to the core of the story, the characters, and the premise of the film. Edit it. Make it great — this treatment is the seed that grows into your film.

Don't use scriptwriting software! Use an outliner to write the story, so it's easy to grab and move things around (a word processor is a distant second choice). Write in prose to start, like you would write a novel, with descriptions and notes and a few key quotes.

Write the hard stuff first. Acts 1, 2, 4, 7, and 8 are easy. Don't write them first. Write the story using a word processor in this order:

Act 6, 2, 5, 3, 4, 7, 8, 1

Write Act 6 first. Focus on the reversal. There should only be one reversal. Figure out the breadcrumbs that get picked up in Act 5, then write the entire Act 6 before you write anything else. Don't worry too much about the protagonist, just write the history lesson and make sure it is rock solid.

Then rough out Act 2. Don't go into too much detail, just choose something that properly gets the bad guy's plan started, hinting at what is to come. Flesh it out later.

Then write Act 5. Act 5 is where the trailer of the movie comes from. (If you don't believe me, watch trailers and take notes.) It embodies the movie's theme — if it's a fish-out-of-water film this is where you see the fish out of water. If it's femjep, this is where the girl gets kidnapped a couple of times. If it's romcom, this is where all the memorable scenes like this one are. Because audiences don't appreciate the reversal, Act 5 is what they will talk about later. The premise, rather than the plot, drives this act — with a few discoveries along the way. It's often mysterious, fun, and funny at the same time.

This act has the set pieces. Balance the expense of the production with the impact of the whammos, because this act is where studio accountants can see costs piling up. Be clever and keep this part intriguing and relatively cheap, so they can spend money on Act 7. For example, talk about helicopters in this act, but use them in Act 2 and Act 7.

Act 5 has some special characteristics. As Chris Vogler notes, this act often starts in a new world, a strange world, and it very often starts in a bar (remember the cantina in Mos Eisley or the cabaret in **A *Bug's Life***), where there are many colorful characters. This should be an unfamiliar world that has its own rules to be discovered. When studio executives talk with you about your film, this is the act they will talk about.

Then write Act 3. Act 3 is character. You'll get a feel for all the moving parts here, you can introduce the love interest, the henchman, the wizard, and other characters. You'll probably want the refusal of the call, and you'll need three bumps — they should tug your protagonist somewhat uncomfortably toward the fight.

Make sure the hero is *not* the right person for the job. Unless it's James Bond, *no one wants to see the right guy (or gal) for the job do the job*. She doesn't have to be the total opposite, but she should be an underdog or a *seemingly unrelated person* who gets sucked in — *as long as her need is fulfilled by doing the job*. Note that the hero's backstory is almost always part of the plot's backstory — she is almost never just a random person. If she has incredible strength, wit, ninja skills, and can solve differential matrix equations in her head, make sure her challenges require another skill, like tattooing a bad guy's chest. Make her improvise, make her suffer, make her struggle, make her fail her way through Act 5. Hit your hero like The Creator hit Truman in Act 5 to keep him guessing. In ***The Fugitive***, Richard really cares about patients and wants to help humanity, but he knows nothing about being a private detective and solving crimes. He has

to learn on the job.

Act 4 should be easy now. It shouldn't be more than a few pages.

Act 7 is easy and fun to write. The hardest thing to do in Act 7 is to keep costs under control. You need to be clever and use resources well.

Act 8 is as short as possible. Make it emotional and roll credits. Don't tie up all the leftover details. Tie up some, but not everything.

Act 1 should be more clear now. Easier to add at the very end, because you may want to use it to foreshadow what you've just worked on.

I'd be careful about using the "secret plan" that the protagonist (and/or his team) have come up with but the audience doesn't know. I think if you really need it, you probably designed the storyline poorly. It's very common, and audiences buy it, but I think audiences would prefer to stay with the hero and her POV, because she hasn't kept any secrets from them before.

Go back and fill in the details. You're most of the way there. Fill in Act 2, resolve Act 8, adjust the timing and length, etc. Ideally, 4 and 6 are set in stone, and you can adjust everything else easily.

At this point, you should have about 30 pages laid out a bit like a novel, with descriptions, notes, and perhaps a few quoted key lines. Get others to review and give feedback at this stage.

Test it. Get friends to read it. Hold a reading. Find experienced readers and get coverage on your mini-novel. Even though people aren't used to reading these, they should be. Push people to read this and give you feedback. Adjust if necessary before going on.

Ideally, producers would read these 30-page synopses as submissions, rather than full scripts. If we could get producers to change their ways, we could probably improve the quality of screenwriting dramatically, because it typically takes 60–120 days to write a feature script, then over the course of a week or two, producers pass on it and don't ever want to see it again. If they like it, they're going to want changes anyway, so this is the point at which to have conversations.

(David's dream sequence …

In case anyone is listening, I think writers could write in Final Draft Outliner, flesh out their outlines, test and edit them, and then just share those outlines with producers. A producer would know exactly what she is looking at and would be able to collaborate with the writer at the outline level, then they could discuss an option deal while the writer is turning the outline into a script.

end of dream sequence.)

But that's not the way Hollywood works, so …

Fire up Final Draft and write the script! When you like the synopsis, set everything up in Final Draft and write the dialogue last. During this phase, be sure to give each character his/her own voice. I think it helps to work with a friend who can write certain characters' parts, because it's too easy to just write dialogue without thinking about what's in each character's head and her speech patterns. If you've done everything else to prepare, this phase should only take a few weeks, because you've already edited the story. This is much faster than deleting hundreds of pages of dialogue that should never have existed in the first place.

When writing the script, I suggest again writing in the same order you wrote the description: Act 6, 2, 5, 3, 4, 7, 8, 1. If you need to adjust the length, do that in Acts 5 and 7, not by adjusting the font size. The font size should be big enough for people in their 50s to read without squinting.

This method lets you make your mistakes easily and cheaply, and it helps you go straight down the middle of the process, rather than veering from side to side.

> Films aren't shot in script order, nor should scripts be written in story order.

NOTE: I haven't gone into all the writing tools, structure tools, and analysis software on the market. I'll leave you to see if any of those fits well with what I have described here. It's very possible that some of those tools and methods are more practical and better than what I have described.

What to Do Next?

First, use this information. Second, tell people it's here. It was buried for two decades, and now it finally has a home.

Read *The Writer's Journey, by Chris Vogler*. This is the only book I ever really found valuable in my studies of narrative structure. I never found McKee to be valuable, because he cherrypicks his examples to suit his theory. *Story Engineering* may be good, but I haven't read it. Same with *Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters*, which looks interesting.

Keep in mind this is only structure. Character, premise, theme, message, dialogue, and scene mechanics are all outside the Nine Act Structure. I'm giving you a toolkit for building a strong frame — you build your frame and then hang everything on that frame. If nothing else, I hope I've given you a way to separate the structure from the rest, so you have a clear head when editing and making changes.

> A strong story is built around a good bad guy.

How to Analyze a Film

Follow this recipe:

1. Don't rely on memory. Watch the film and write down the action of each minute. At the very least, review the film on video as you work through these steps …
2. Who is the antagonist and what his his/her plan?
3. Who is the protagonist? Whose story is it? Could there be more than one? What is his/her need?
4. What is the commitment? How legitimate is it?
5. What is the false goal?
6. How far back in time do the breadcrumbs go?
7. What turns the story? Describe act 6 in detail. List several possible hypotheses and think each one through. In general, the evidence will lead you to one. How strong is the reversal?
8. How does act 7 keep the audience guessing?
9. Write up your full analysis and discuss any deviations from the standard Nine-Act profile.

Quiz Questions

I apologize, these films are dated. If I have time, I'll add more contemporary questions.

Easy questions

Who is the protagonist in ***Ratatouille***? Who's the antagonist? What turns the story?
What revelation turns the story in ***Chinatown***?
Are the hallucinations in **A Beautiful Mind** relevant to the plot?
Analyze ***Apollo 13*** and ***The Right Stuff.***
Analyze ***Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid***.
Analyze ***Cool Hand Luke***.
Analyze ***Cars***. Who's the antagonist?
In ***Saving Private Ryan***, what role does Ryan play?
In ***Tootsie***, who is the antagonist? What turns the story?
Analyze ***Thelma and Louise***.
Analyze ***War Games***.
Analyze ***When Harry Met Sally***.
Analyze ***Analyze This***.
Analyze ***Parenthood***.
Analyze ***Finding Nemo***: Why is Marvin not the protagonist?

Medium-hard questions

In the world of the Nine-Act Structure, what's the definition of a tragedy?
Who is the protagonist in ***Psycho***?
American Beauty starts with a little shocker. Imagine how you could work that into the film rather than putting it at the beginning. Can you find a better solution, or do you think they way they did it is optimal?
Analyze ***Casablanca.***
Analyze ***Rain Man.***
In ***Jurassic Park***, who is the antagonist?
In ***Total Recall***, what role does Hauser play? Who is the mastermind?
Analyze ***Ocean's Eleven.***
Analyze ***The Sting***.
Analyze ***Natural Born Killers***.
Analyze ***Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade***.
Analyze ***Lara Croft, Tomb Raider***.
Compare the structures of ***Beverly Hills Cop I and II***.
Analyze ***Catch Me if you Can.***
Analyze ***Fatal Attraction***.
Compare my analysis of ***Rocky*** with a three-act analysis.
Compare my analysis of ***The Truman Show*** with a three-act analysis.
Piece together ***Casablanca***. It's fun and interesting.

Analyze ***Angel Heart***.
Analyze ***The Wrestler***.
Analyze ***Shrek I and II*** — how do they compare structurally?
At least two films I've mentioned on this page end at Act 6. What other films end at Act 6? Discuss why they are this way.

Hard questions

Who is the protagonist in ***The Godfather***? Who is the antagonist?
Analyze ***The Wizard of Oz*** (very advanced).
From the above question — how do you deal with story-within-a-story? Can you generalize this? Does my recursive theory hold for stories-within-stories?
Look at adaptations from novels to films and try to learn how the Nine-Act structure may apply to both. Try analyzing the film ***Adaptation***.
In ***Gone with the Wind***, who is the protagonist? What is the turning point?
In ***Apocalypse Now***, what is Willard's need? What are his two goals? Who is the antagonist?
Analyze ***Toy Story*** (Who's the protagonist? Who is the antagonist? What are their goals? What turns the story? See note **).
From the above, can you generalize a buddy-film protagonist formula using the Nine-Act framework?
Analyze ***all Pixar films*** and discuss their structures against each other (Include ***The Princess and the Frog***).
Analyze ***The Sixth Sense***. Who is the protagonist? What is unusual about Act 5? Can you imagine a way to improve this?
Analyze ***Titanic***. (very advanced)
Analyze ***Fantasia.***
Are there structural similarities among films where the protagonist is also the antagonist? Can we generalize anything about these films and their structures?
Are there good examples with two antagonists, or a story-within-a-story where each level has its own antagonist? This is something I haven't researched.

Quotes

> *"David Siegel, with his concept of the 9-Act Story Structure, has opened my eyes and my thinking about how stories function on the deepest levels, and how they can be told for the greatest audience impact. Writers: don't limit yourself to 3-act structure! The 9-Act Story Structure points the way!"*

> *— Lee Matthias, Lateral Screenwriting — Using the Power of Lateral Thinking to Write Great Movies.*

Epilogue

I don't plan to update this page much, but I do hope people will use my work and acknowledge my contribution. It will be interesting to see how other people incorporate this work into their theories, structures, and consulting.

- If you find a mistake or a dead link, please let me know.
- I won't allow comments. If someone wants to set up a Slack or Reddit or community to discuss this, I'll gladly point to it from here, just let me know.
- If you want me to help you with your script — I can't, I'm sorry, I'm far too busy.
- I don't have time to answer questions about this material.
- If somehow you want to help move this project forward or make it useful in some commercial way, contact me. I am interested in consulting for studios, producers, and directors as time permits.
- If you have an academic interest and think you could get funding for research along these lines, definitely contact me. Ideally, someone will help me put a few thousand films into a database, then we can use data science and look for interesting insights.
- If you have a page on story structure, I'm not going to link to it. I don't have time to maintain a list of links and resources, sorry. If you mention me, please give me proper credit and link to **nineactstructure.com**.
- If you want to develop a resources page that complements this, I'll gladly link to it.

I'm david at dsiegel.com. Please accept my apologies in advance if you try to contact me and I don't get back to you.

Oh, my script? It's called ***Run Sid Run***. You're welcome to download and read it, and you'll see the nine acts readily. I still have the copyright, but I'm happy for people to read it for any reason. My manager would be happy to talk with anyone interested in the rights to produce it.

*In 1986, I worked for Pixar. In about 1992, I met with Ed Catmull to explain my research on the Nine Act Structure. He said it wouldn't apply to ***Toy Story***, because it was "a buddy picture." I was disappointed that he didn't ask me to do some consulting and research on the Toy Story script, but they didn't need me to help them craft a script that contains all nine acts, like clockwork.

** There are different interpretations of ***Toy Story***, depending on who you see as protagonist and antagonist. My view is that Woody is the protagonist and Buzz is the sidekick. Woody's first goal is to get rid of Buzz, but that's a false goal. His real goal is to vanquish Sid, the evil mastermind who tortures toys. After they accomplish that, it's a matter of getting back to Andy and his family. Two unusual things: 1) the arrival of Buzz does not portend the future conflict, and 2) Act 8 is very long and cliff-hanging. Other interpretations are possible. Kevin B says Woody and Buzz are co-protagonists and their single goal is to stay with Andy. Another point is that Buzz has his own back-story revelation and reversal. The point of my tool is to have intelligent conversations around such views.

David Siegel is an American serial entrepreneur living in Washington, DC. The only company he's ever worked for that he didn't start is Pixar, in 1986. He is the founder of the Pillar project. His full bio is at dsiegel.com. Connect to him on LinkedIn.

If you liked this, you may want to learn to ski, learn about high-end dark chocolate, or read about global warming.

Storytelling Screenwriting Writing Film Movies