

a screenplay from the position of choice, confidence, and security that you know what you're doing. As I said earlier, *the hardest thing about writing is knowing what to write*. When you complete this book, you will know exactly *what* to do to write a professional screenplay. Whether you do it or not is up to you.

Talent is God's gift; either you've got it or you don't. But writing is a personal responsibility; either you do it or you don't.

What Is a Screenplay?

"Suppose you're in your office.... A pretty stenographer you've seen before comes into the room and you watch her.... She takes off her gloves, opens her purse and dumps it out on the table.... She has two dimes and a nickel—and a cardboard match box. She leaves the nickel on the desk, puts the two dimes back into her purse and takes her black gloves to the stove.... Just then your telephone rings. The girl picks it up, says hello—listens—and says deliberately into the phone, "I've never owned a pair of black gloves in my life." She hangs up ... and you glance around very suddenly and see another man in the office, watching every move the girl makes...."

"Go on," said Boxley smiling. "What happens?"

"I don't know," said Stahr. "I was just making pictures."

—*The Last Tycoon*
F. Scott Fitzgerald

In the summer of 1937, F. Scott Fitzgerald, drinking far too much, deeply in debt, and drowning in the suffocating well of despair, moved to Hollywood seeking new beginnings, hoping to reinvent himself by writing for the movies. The author of *The Great Gatsby*, *Tender Is the Night*, *This Side of Paradise*, and the uncompleted *The Last Tycoon*, perhaps America's greatest novelist, was, as one friend put it, seeking redemption.

During the two and a half years he spent in Hollywood, he took the craft of screenwriting “very seriously,” says one noted Fitzgerald authority: “It’s heartbreaking to see how much effort he put into it.” Fitzgerald approached every screenplay as if it were a novel and often wrote long backstories for each of the main characters before putting one word of dialogue down on paper.

Despite all the preparation he put into each assignment, he was obsessed with finding the answer to a question that haunted him continuously: *What makes a good screenplay?* Billy Wilder once compared Fitzgerald to “a great sculptor who is hired to do a plumbing job. He did not know how to connect the pipes so the water could flow.”

Throughout his Hollywood years, he was always trying to find the “balance” between the words spoken and the pictures seen. During this time, he received only one screen credit, adapting the novel *Three Comrades* by Erich Maria Remarque (starring Robert Taylor and Margaret Sullavan), but Joseph L. Mankiewicz eventually rewrote his script. He worked on rewrites for several other movies, including a disastrous week on *Gone With the Wind* (he was forbidden to use any words that did not appear in Margaret Mitchell’s novel), but after *Three Comrades*, all of his projects ended in failure. One, a script for Joan Crawford called *Infidelity*, was left uncompleted, canceled because it dealt with the theme of adultery. Fitzgerald died in 1941, working on his last, unfinished novel, *The Last Tycoon*.

He died believing himself to be a failure.

I’ve always been intrigued by the journey of F. Scott Fitzgerald. What resonates with me the most is that he was constantly searching for *the answer* to what made a good screenplay. His overwhelming external circumstances—his wife Zelda’s institutionalization, his unmanageable debts and lifestyle, his excessive drinking—all fed into his insecurities about the craft of screenwriting. And make no mistake: Screenwriting is a craft, a craft that can be learned. Even though he worked excessively hard, and was disciplined and responsible, he failed to achieve the results he was so desperately striving for.

Why?

I don’t think there’s any one answer. But reading his books and writings and letters from this period, it seems clear that he was never exactly sure what a screenplay *was*; he always wondered whether he was “doing it right,” whether there were certain rules he had to follow in order to write a successful screenplay.

When I was studying at the University of California, Berkeley, as an English lit major, I read the first and second editions of *Tender Is the Night* for one of my classes. It is the story of a psychiatrist who marries one of his patients, who, as she slowly recovers, exhausts his vitality until he is “a man used up.” The book, the last one Fitzgerald completed, was considered technically faulty and was commercially unsuccessful.

In the first edition of the novel, Book I is written from the point of view of Rosemary Hoyt, a young actress who shares her observations about meeting the circle that surrounds Dick and Nicole Diver. Rosemary is on the beach at Cap d’Antibes on the French Riviera, watching the Divers enjoying an outing on the sand. As she watches, she sees them as a beautiful couple who appear, at least from her point of view, to have everything going for them. They are, she thinks, the ideal couple. Rich, beautiful, intelligent, they look to be the embodiment of what everyone wants for himself or herself. But the second book of the novel focuses on the life of Dick and Nicole, and we learn that what we saw through Rosemary’s eyes was only the relationship they showed to the world; it was not really true. The Divers have major problems, which drain them emotionally and spiritually, and ultimately destroy them.

When the first edition of *Tender Is the Night* was published, sales were poor, and Fitzgerald thought he had probably been drinking too much and might have compromised his vision. But from his Hollywood experience, he came to believe he did not introduce his main characters early enough. “Its great fault,” Fitzgerald wrote of *Tender Is the Night* to his editor, Maxwell Perkins, “is that the *true* beginning—the young psychiatrist in Switzerland—is tucked away in the middle of the book.” He decided that when the second edition was printed, he would interchange the first section with the second and open the novel with Dick Diver in wartime Switzerland in order to explain the mystery about the Divers’ courtship and

marriage. So he opened the book focusing on the main character, Dick Diver. But that didn't work either, and Fitzgerald was crushed. The book was financially unsuccessful until many years later, when Fitzgerald's genius was finally acknowledged.

What strikes me so vividly is what Fitzgerald *didn't* see; his opening section focusing on how Rosemary saw the Divers was more cinematic than novelistic. It's a great cinematic opening, setting up the characters as others see them, like an establishing shot; in this first edition, Fitzgerald was *showing* us how this model couple looked to the world, beautiful and rich, seeming to have everything. How we look to the outside world, of course, is a lot different from who we really are behind closed doors. My personal feeling is that it was Fitzgerald's insecurity about the craft of screenwriting that drove him to change that great opening.

F. Scott Fitzgerald was an artist literally caught between two worlds, caught between his genius as a writer and his self-doubt and inability to express that genius in screenplay form.

Screenwriting is a definite craft, a definite art. Over the years, I've read thousands upon thousands of screenplays, and I always look for certain things. First, how does it look on the page? Is there plenty of white space, or are the paragraphs dense, too thick, the dialogue too long? Or is the reverse true: Is the scene description too thin, the dialogue too sparse? And this is before I read one word; this is just what it "looks" like on the page. You'd be surprised how many decisions are made in Hollywood by the way a screenplay looks—you can tell whether it's been written by a professional or by someone who's still aspiring to be a professional.

Everybody is writing screenplays, from the waiter at your favorite bar or restaurant to the limo driver, the doctor, the lawyer, or the barista serving up the White Chocolate Dream Latte at the local Coffee Bean. Last year, more than seventy-five thousand screenplays were registered at the Writers Guild of America, West and East, and out of that number maybe four or five hundred scripts were actually produced.

What makes one screenplay better than another? There are many answers, of course, because each screenplay is unique. But if you want to sit down and spend six months to a year writing a

screenplay, you first have to know what a screenplay *is*—*what its nature is*.

What is a screenplay? Is it a guide, or an outline, for a movie? A blueprint, or a diagram? Or maybe it's a series of images, scenes, and sequences strung together with dialogue and description, like pearls on a strand? Perhaps it's simply the landscape of a dream?

Well, for one thing, a screenplay is not a novel, and it's most certainly not a play. If you look at a novel and try to define its fundamental nature, you'll see that the dramatic action, the story line, usually takes place inside the head of the main character. We see the story line unfold through the eyes of the character, through his/her point of view. We are privy to the character's thoughts, feelings, emotions, words, actions, memories, dreams, hopes, ambitions, opinions, and more. The character and reader go through the action together, sharing in the drama and emotion of the story. We know how they act, feel, react, and figure things out. If other characters appear and are brought into the narrative line of action, then the story embraces their point of view, but the main thrust of the story line always returns to the main character. The main character is who the story is about. In a novel the action takes place inside the character's head, within the *mind*scape of dramatic action.

A play is different. The action, or story line, occurs onstage, under the proscenium arch, and the audience becomes the fourth wall, eavesdropping on the lives of the characters, what they think and feel and say. They talk about their hopes and dreams, past and future plans, discuss their needs and desires, fears and conflicts. In this case, the action of the play occurs within the *language* of dramatic action; it is spoken in words that describe feelings, actions, and emotions.

A screenplay is different. Movies are different. Film is a visual medium that dramatizes a basic story line; it deals in pictures, images, bits and pieces of film: We *see* a clock ticking, a window opening, a person in the distance leaning over a balcony, smoking; in the background we hear a phone ringing, a baby crying, a dog barking as we see two people laughing as their car pulls away from the curb. "Just making pictures." The nature of the screenplay deals in pictures, and if we wanted to define it, we could say that a screenplay is

a story told with pictures, in dialogue and description, and placed within the context of dramatic structure.

That is its essential nature, just like a rock is hard and water's wet.

Because a screenplay is a story told with pictures, we can ask ourselves, what do all stories have in common? They have a beginning, middle, and an end, not necessarily in that order, as Jean-Luc Godard says. Screenplays have a basic linear structure that creates the *form* of the screenplay because it holds all the individual elements, or pieces, of the story line in place.

To understand the principle of structure, it's important to start with the word itself. The root of structure, *struct*, has two definitions that are relevant. The first definition means "to build" or "to put something together," like a building or car. The second definition is "the relationship between the parts and the whole."

The parts and the whole. This is an important distinction. What is the relationship between the parts and the whole? How do you separate one from the other? If you take the game of chess, for example, the game itself is a whole composed of four parts: (1) *the pieces*—the queen, king, bishop, pawns, knights, etc.; (2) *the player(s)*, because someone has to play the game of chess, either against another person or a computer; (3) *the board*, because you can't play chess without a board, and (4) *the rules*, because you can't play a chess game unless you play by the rules. Those four parts—the pieces, the player(s), the board, and the rules—are integrated into the whole, and the result is a game of chess. It is the relationship between these parts and the whole that determines the game.

The same relationship holds true in a story. A story is the whole, and the elements that make up the story—the action, characters, conflicts, scenes, sequences, dialogue, action, Acts I, II, and III, incidents, episodes, events, music, locations, etc.—are the parts, and this relationship between the parts and the whole make up the story.

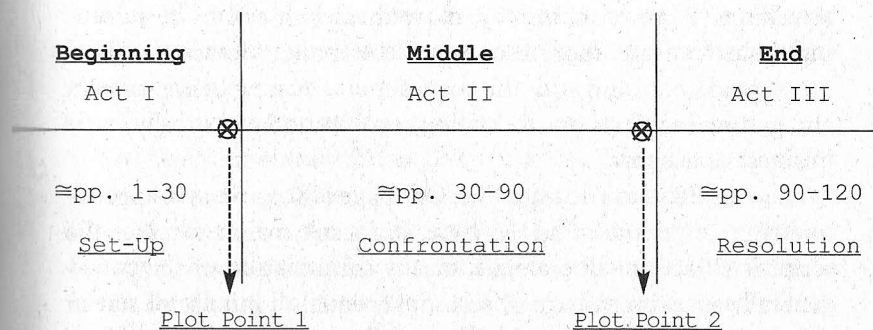
Good structure is like the relationship between an ice cube and water. An ice cube has a definite crystalline structure, and water has a definite molecular structure. But when the ice cube melts into water, how can you separate the molecules of ice from the molecules

of water? Structure is like gravity: It is the glue that holds the story in place; it is the base, the foundation, the spine, the skeleton of the story. And it is this relationship between the parts and the whole that holds the screenplay together. It's what makes it what it is.

It is the *paradigm* of dramatic structure.

A *paradigm* is a model, example, or conceptual scheme. The paradigm of a table, for example, is a top with four legs. Within the paradigm, we can have a low table, high table, narrow table, or wide table; we can have a round table, square table, rectangular table, or octagonal table; we can have a glass table, wood table, plastic table, wrought-iron table, or whatever, and the paradigm doesn't change—it remains what it is, a top with four legs. Just the way a suitcase remains a suitcase; it doesn't matter how big or small, or what the shape is; it is what it is.

If we wanted to take a screenplay and hang it on the wall like a painting, this is what it would look like:



This is the *paradigm* of a screenplay. Here's how it's broken down:

ACT I IS THE SET-UP

If a screenplay is a story told with pictures, then what do all stories have in common? A beginning, middle, and end, though not necessarily, as mentioned, in that order; it is a story told in pictures, in

dialogue and description, and placed within the context of dramatic structure.

Aristotle talked about the three unities of dramatic action: time, place, and action. The normal Hollywood film is approximately two hours long, or 120 minutes; foreign films tend to be a little shorter, though that's changing as we bridge the language of international film. But in most cases, films are approximately two hours in length, give or take a few minutes. This is a standard length, and today, when a contract is written in Hollywood between the filmmaker and production company, it states that when the movie is delivered, it will be no longer than 2 hours and 8 minutes. That's approximately 128 pages of screenplay. Why? Because it's an economic decision that has evolved over the years. At this writing, it costs approximately \$10,000 to \$12,000 per minute (and getting higher and higher every year) to shoot a Hollywood studio film. Second, a two-hour movie has a definite advantage in the theaters simply because you can get in more viewings of the movie per day. More screenings mean more money; more theaters mean more screenings, which means more money will be made. Movies are *business*, after all, and with the cost of moviemaking being so high, and getting higher as our technology evolves, today it's really more business than show.

The way it breaks down is this: One page of screenplay is approximately one minute of screen time. It doesn't matter whether the script is all action, all dialogue, or any combination of the two—generally speaking, a page of screenplay equals a minute of screen time. It's a good rule of thumb to follow. There are exceptions to this, of course. The script of *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* is only 118 pages, but the movie is more than three hours long.

Act I, the beginning, is a unit of dramatic action that is approximately twenty or thirty pages long and is held together with the dramatic context known as the *Set-Up*. Context is the space that *holds* something in place—in this case, the content. For example, the space inside a glass is the *context*; it holds the *content* in place—whether it's water, beer, milk, coffee, tea, or juice. If we want to get creative, a glass can also hold raisins, trail mix, nuts, grapes, etc.—

but the space inside doesn't change. The *context* is what *holds* the *content* in place.

In this unit of dramatic action, Act I, the screenwriter *sets up* the story, establishes character, launches the dramatic premise (what the story is about), illustrates the situation (the circumstances surrounding the action), and creates the relationships between the main character and the other characters who inhabit the landscape of his or her world. As a writer you've only got about ten minutes to establish this, because the audience members can usually determine, either consciously or unconsciously, whether they do or don't like the movie by that time. If they don't know what's going on and the opening is vague or boring, their concentration and focus will falter and start wandering.

Check it out. The next time you go to a movie, do a little exercise: Find out how long it takes you to make a decision about whether you like the film or not. A good indication is if you start thinking about getting something from the refreshment stand or find yourself shifting in your seat; if that happens, the chances are the filmmaker has lost you as a viewer. Ten minutes is ten pages of screenplay. I cannot emphasize enough that this first ten-page unit of dramatic action is the most important part of the screenplay.

In *American Beauty* (Alan Ball), after the brief opening video scene of the daughter Jane (Thora Birch) and her boyfriend, Ricky (Wes Bentley), we see the street where Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) lives, and hear his first words in voice-over: "My name is Lester Burnham. I'm forty-two years old. In less than a year, I'll be dead. . . . In a way, I'm dead already." Then we see Lester as he begins his day. He wakes up and jerks off (the high point of his day, he adds), and then we see his relationship with his family. All this is set up and established within the first few pages, and we learn that: "My wife and daughter think I'm this gigantic loser, and they're right. . . . I have lost something. I don't know what it was, but I have lost something. . . . I feel sedated. . . . But you know, it's never too late to get it back." And that lets us know what the story is all about: Lester regaining the life he has lost or given up, and becoming whole and complete again as a person. Within the first few pages of the screenplay we know the main character, the dramatic premise, and the situation.

In *Chinatown* (Robert Towne), we learn on page one that Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson), the main character, is a sleazy private detective specializing in “discreet investigation.” We see this when he shows Curly (Burt Young) pictures of his wife having sex in the park. We also see that Gittes has a certain flair for this type of investigation. A few pages later, we are introduced to a certain Mrs. Mulwray (Diane Ladd), who wants to hire Jake Gittes to find out “who my husband is having an affair with.” That is the dramatic premise of the film, because the answer to that question is what leads us into the story. The dramatic premise is what the screenplay is about; it provides the dramatic thrust that drives the story to its conclusion.

In *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens, and Peter Jackson, based on the book by J. R. R. Tolkien), we learn in the first six pages of the screenplay the history of the ring and its magnetic attraction. It’s a beautiful opening that sets up all three stories. It also sets up the story as Gandalf arrives in the Shire. We meet Frodo (Elijah Wood), Bilbo Baggins (Ian Holm), Sam (Sean Astin), and the others, see how they live, and are introduced to the ring. We also get an overview of Middle Earth. This opening sets up the rest of the *Fellowship*, including the two sequels, *The Two Towers* and *Return of the King*.

In *Witness* (Earl Wallace and William Kelley), the first ten pages reveal the world of the Amish in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. The script opens with the funeral of Rachel’s (Kelly McGillis’s) husband, then we follow her to Philadelphia, where her child witnesses the murder of an undercover cop, and that in turn leads to her relationship with the main character, John Book (Harrison Ford), another cop. The entire first act is designed to reveal the dramatic premise and situation and to set up the relationship between an Amish woman and a tough Philadelphia cop.

ACT II IS CONFRONTATION

Act II is a unit of dramatic action approximately sixty pages long, and goes from the end of Act I, anywhere from pages 20 to 30,

to the end of Act II, approximately pages 85 to 90, and is held together with the dramatic context known as *Confrontation*. During this second act the main character encounters obstacle after obstacle that keeps him/her from achieving his/her dramatic need, which is defined as *what the character wants to win, gain, get, or achieve during the course of the screenplay*. If you know your character’s dramatic need, you can create obstacles to it and then your story becomes your character, overcoming obstacle after obstacle to achieve his/her dramatic need.

In *Cold Mountain*, Inman (Jude Law) struggles over two hundred miles to return home to Cold Mountain. This dramatic need is both internal and external: It is Inman’s longing to return to a place in his heart that existed prior to the war, and Cold Mountain is also the place where he lived and grew up, as well as where his loved one, Ada (Nicole Kidman), resides. His desire, his dramatic need to return home, is fraught with obstacle after obstacle, and still he persists, only to fail at the end. Literally, the entire movie is overcoming the obstacles of war and the internal will to survive.

In *Chinatown*, a detective story, Act II deals with Jake Gittes’s collisions with people who try to keep him from finding out who’s responsible for the murder of Hollis Mulwray and who’s behind the water scandal. The obstacles that Gittes encounters and overcomes dictate the dramatic action of the story. Look at *The Fugitive*. The entire story is driven by the main character’s dramatic need to bring his wife’s killer to justice. Act II is where your character has to deal with surviving the obstacles that you put in front of him or her. What is it that drives him or her forward through the action? What does your main character want? What is his or her dramatic need? In *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, the entire film involves Frodo, Sam, and the Fellowship’s confronting and managing to overcome obstacle after obstacle, leading to the climactic battle at Helms Deep.

All drama is conflict. Without conflict, you have no action; without action, you have no character; without character, you have no story; and without story, you have no screenplay.

ACT III IS RESOLUTION

Act III is a unit of dramatic action approximately twenty to thirty pages long and goes from the end of Act II, approximately pages 85 to 90, to the end of the screenplay. It is held together with the dramatic context known as *Resolution*. I think it's important to remember that resolution does not mean ending; *resolution means solution*. What is the solution of your screenplay? Does your main character live or die? Succeed or fail? Get married or not? Win the race or not? Win the election or not? Escape safely or not? Leave her husband or not? Return home safely or not? Act III is that unit of action that *resolves* the story. It is not the ending; the ending is that specific scene or shot or sequence that ends the script.

Beginning, middle, and end; Act I, Act II, Act III. *Set-Up*, *Confrontation*, *Resolution*—these parts make up the whole. It is the relationship between these parts that determines the whole.

But this brings up another question: If these parts make up the whole, the screenplay, how do you get from Act I, the *Set-Up*, to Act II, the *Confrontation*? And how do you get from Act II to Act III, the *Resolution*? The answer is to create a *Plot Point* at the end of both Act I and Act II.

A *Plot Point* is defined as *any incident, episode, or event that hooks into the action and spins it around in another direction*—in this case, Plot Point I moves the action forward into Act II and Plot Point II moves the action into Act III. Plot Point I occurs at the end of Act I, anywhere from pages 20 to 25 or 30.

A *Plot Point* is always a function of the main character. In *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, Plot Point I is the beginning of the journey, that moment when Frodo and Sam leave the Shire and set out on their adventure through Middle Earth. Plot Point II is when the Fellowship reaches Lothlorien, and Galadriel (Cate Blanchett) reveals to Frodo the fate of Middle Earth should the ring not reach Mount Doom. Frodo becomes the reluctant hero, in much the same way that Neo (Keanu Reeves) in *The Matrix* (Larry and Andy Wachowski), accepts his mantle of responsibility at Plot Point I: his journey as “The One” begins at Plot Point I. It is the true beginning of that story.

If we take a look at *The Matrix*, we can see Plot Points I and II clearly delineated. In Plot Point I, Neo chooses the Red Pill, and Act II begins when he is literally reborn; at Plot Point II, Neo and Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) rescue Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), and only then does Neo accept the truth that he is “The One.”

Plot Points serve an essential purpose in the screenplay; they are a major story progression and keep the story line anchored in place. In *Chinatown*, Jake Gittes is hired by the wife of a prominent man to find out if her husband is having an affair. Gittes follows him and sees him with a young girl. That's the Set-Up. Plot Point I occurs after the newspaper story is released claiming Mr. Mulwray has been caught in a “love nest.” That's when the *real* Mrs. Mulwray shows up with her attorney and threatens to sue Jake Gittes and have his license revoked. If *she* is the real Mrs. Mulwray, who was the woman who hired Jake Gittes? And *why* did she hire him? And *who* hired the phony Mrs. Mulwray? And *why*? The arrival of the real Mrs. Mulwray is what hooks into the action and spins it around in another direction—in this case, Act II. It is story progression; Jake Gittes must find out who set him up, and why. The answer is the rest of the movie.

In *Cold Mountain*, as Inman recovers from his wounds he receives a letter from Ada. We hear her say, in voice-over, “Come back to me. Come back to me is my request.” Inman nods; his decision is made: He will desert the Confederate Army and return home to Ada and Cold Mountain, return to the place in his heart.

Plot Points do not have to be big, dynamic scenes or sequences; they can be quiet scenes in which a decision is made, such as Inman's, or when Frodo and Sam leave the Shire. Take the sequence in *American Beauty* where Lester Burnham and his wife are at the high school basketball game and see their daughter's friend Angela (Mena Suvari) performing at halftime. It moves the story forward and sets Lester's emotional journey of liberation in motion. In *The Matrix*, Plot Point I is where Neo is offered the choice of the Red Pill or the Blue Pill. He chooses the Red Pill, and this truly is the beginning of the story. All of Act I has set up the elements and led Neo to this moment.

Remember, the paradigm is the *form* of a screenplay, what it

looks like. Any page numbers I reference are only a guideline to indicate approximately *where* the story progresses to the next level, not *how* it progresses. How you do that is up to you. It is the form of the screenplay that is important, not the page numbers where Plot Points occur. There may be many Plot Points during the course of the story line; I only focus on Plot Points I and II because these two events are the anchoring moments that become the foundation of the dramatic structure in the screenplay.

Plot Point II is really the same as Plot Point I; it is the way to move the story forward, from Act II to Act III. It is a story progression. As mentioned, it usually occurs anywhere between pages 80 or 90 of the screenplay. In *Chinatown*, Plot Point II occurs when Jake Gittes finds a pair of horn-rim glasses in the pond where Hollis Mulwray was murdered, and knows the glasses belonged either to Mulwray or to the person who killed him. This leads us to the *Resolution* of the story.

In *Cold Mountain*, Plot Point II is a quiet moment; after Inman meets the woman Sara (Natalie Portman) and rescues her and her baby from the Northerners, he reaches a point where he can see the Blue Ridge Mountains. The script reads: "Somewhere in there is home, is Ada. He goes on." That's all; such a small scene, but loaded with such emotion: He's home. That leads us into Act III, the *Resolution*.

Do all good screenplays fit the paradigm? Yes. But just because a screenplay is well structured and fits the paradigm doesn't make it a good screenplay, or a good movie. The paradigm is a form, not a formula. Structure is what holds the story together.

What's the distinction between form and formula? The form of a coat or jacket, for example, is two arms, a front, and a back. And within that form of arms, front, and back you can have any variation of style, fabric, color, and size—but the form remains intact.

A formula, however, is totally different. A formula never varies; certain elements are put together so they come out *exactly the same* each and every time. If you put that coat on an assembly line, every coat will be exactly the same, with the same pattern, the same fabric,

the same color, the same cut, the same material. The coat does not change, except for the size. A screenplay, on the other hand, is unique, a totally individual presentation.

The paradigm is a form, not a formula; it's what holds the story together. It is the spine, the skeleton. Story determines structure; structure doesn't determine story.

The dramatic structure of the screenplay may be defined as a *linear arrangement of related incidents, episodes, or events leading to a dramatic resolution*.

How you utilize these structural components determines the form of your screenplay. *The Hours* (David Hare, adapted from the novel by Michael Cunningham) is told in three different time periods and has a definite structure. It's the same with *American Beauty*: The whole story is told in flashback, just like Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*. *Cold Mountain* is also told in flashback, but has a definite beginning, middle, and end. *Citizen Kane* is also told in flashback, but this does not detract from its form.

The *paradigm* is a model, an example, or a conceptual scheme; it is what a well-structured screenplay looks like, an overview of the story line as it unfolds from beginning to end.

Screenplays that work follow the paradigm. But don't take my word for it. Go to a movie and see whether you can determine its structure for yourself.

Some of you may not believe that. You may not believe in beginnings, middles, and ends, either. You may say that art, like life, is nothing more than several individual "moments" suspended in some giant middle, with no beginning and no end, what Kurt Vonnegut calls "a series of random moments" strung together in a haphazard fashion.

I disagree.

Birth? Life? Death? Isn't that a beginning, middle, and end? Spring, summer, fall, and winter—Isn't that a beginning, middle, and end? Morning, afternoon, evening—it's always the same, but different. Think about the rise and fall of great ancient civilizations—Egyptian, Greek, and Roman, each rising from the seed of a small community to the apex of power, then disintegrating and dying.

Think about the birth and death of a star, or the beginning of the universe. If there's a beginning, like the Big Bang, is there going to be an end?

Think about the cells in our bodies. How often are they replenished, restored, and re-created? Every seven years—within a seven-year cycle all the cells in our bodies are born, function, die, and are reborn again.

Think about the first day of a new job, or a new school, or a new house or apartment; you'll meet new people, assume new responsibilities, create new friendships.

Screenplays are no different. They have a definite beginning, middle, and end, but not necessarily in that order.

If you don't believe the paradigm, or in the three-act structure first laid down by Aristotle, go check it out. Go to a movie—go see several movies—and see whether they fit the paradigm or not.

If you're interested in writing screenplays, you should be doing this all the time. Every movie you see is a learning process, expanding your awareness and comprehension of what a movie is: a story told with pictures.

You should also read as many screenplays as possible in order to expand your awareness of the form and structure. Many screenplays have been reprinted in book form and most bookstores have them, or can order them. You can also go online and do a Google search under "screenplays" and find a number of sites that allow you to download screenplays. Some are free, some you pay for.

I have my students read and study scripts like *Chinatown*, *Network* (Paddy Chayefsky), *American Beauty*, *The Shawshank Redemption* (Frank Darabont), *Sideways* (Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor), *The Matrix*, *Annie Hall*, and *Lord of the Rings*. These scripts are excellent teaching aids. If they aren't available, read any screenplay you can find. The more the better.

The paradigm works. It is the *foundation* of every good screenplay, the foundation of *dramatic structure*.

The Subject

"Rosebud... Maybe that was something he lost.... You see, Mr. Kane was a man who lost almost everything he had."

—Everett Sloane speculating on the meaning of "Rosebud"

Citizen Kane

Herman Mankiewicz and Orson Welles

Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* has been universally acclaimed as the greatest film ever made. From the very first frame, the full portrait of Kane's character is set up visually; the film opens shrouded in fog and the first thing we see is a high wired chain-link fence bolstered with the initial K. Deep in the background, a huge, isolated mansion stands high on the hill. Moving closer, we see boxes and crates of antiques, artworks, and ancient artifacts stacked everywhere. Huge pens house exotic animals, and then we're inside the enormous castle, so full, yet so empty of life. Then we cut to an extreme close-up of the man known as Citizen Kane as he whispers his last word: "Rosebud." A glass paperweight falls from his fingers and breaks open, and we see snow, the first glimpse of a lost childhood.

Like a classic mystery, the story begins. Who is Charles Foster Kane? What is he? Who or what is Rosebud? As if in answer, we cut to a darkened screening room filled with chain-smoking reporters and watch newsreel footage of Charles Foster Kane, a man larger than life, filled with an insatiable appetite, a man of total excess.

The great director Robert Wise (*West Side Story*, *The Sound of Music*, *The Sand Pebbles*, to name just a few) edited the film, and he shared with me in one of our conversations that Welles first shot all the simulated newsreel footage, and then, to make it appear more "real," he had Wise crinkle it up and drag it across the cutting room