

Crash Course on Screenwriting

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What's a screenplay?

- **Short answer:** a movie script!
- **Long (?) answer:** a visual- and dialogue-driven story



Topics

- Screenplay format
- Screenplay structure
- Story building
- Developing characters
- General tips
- Film synopses and film treatments
- Resources

Screenplay Format

TRANSITION



FADE IN:

SLUGLINE



INT. LIVING ROOM OF STELLA'S HOUSE - EVENING

STELLA (late-teens, rude and judgmental) is lying upside down on the couch, playing with tarot cards. She hears loud banging.



ACTION DESCRIPTION

DEFINE YOUR SPACE

INT = interior

EXT = exterior

TIME OF DAY: morning,
afternoon, evening,
night, dawn, dusk

INT. LIVING ROOM OF STELLA'S HOUSE - EVENING

**SPECIFY ACTUAL
LOCATION**

First instance of a character is all caps



Include quick generic description of your character-- the age should be a range



STELLA (late-teens, rude and judgmental) is lying upside down on the couch, playing with tarot cards. She hears loud banging.

Each block of action/description should be like max 3 lines

FADE IN:

INT. LIVING ROOM OF STELLA'S HOUSE - EVENING

STELLA (late-teens, rude and judgmental) is lying upside down on the couch, playing with tarot cards. She hears loud banging.

STELLA

Coming!

Stella walks over and swings the door open. GIGI (late teens, giggly and oblivious) grins and holds up a pack of tarot cards.

GIGI

Oh my gosh! I bought tarot cards,
too!

STELLA

(sarcastically)
Gee, you don't say!

Gigi is unfazed by Stella's annoyance and strolls past in. She lies sprawling on the couch as if she owns the place.

GIGI

I've been dying to do a seance all
week! Do you have any candles?

Stella gestures at the collection of candles right beside the coffee table. She taps her foot until Gigi finally sees them.

GIGI (CONT'D)

Oh, there they are! Duh.

TRANSITION



FADE IN:

SLUGLINE



INT. LIVING ROOM OF STELLA'S HOUSE - EVENING

STELLA (late-teens, rude and judgmental) is lying upside down on the couch, playing with tarot cards. She hears loud banging.

DIALOGUE



STELLA
Coming!



GIGI
Oh my gosh! I bought tarot cards, too!

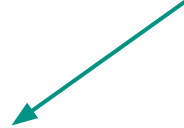
PARENTHETICAL
DESCRIPTION



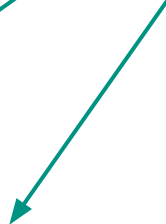
STELLA
(sarcastically)
Gee, you don't say!

Gigi is unfazed by Stella's annoyance and strolls past in. She lies sprawling on the couch as if she owns the place.

ACTION/
DESCRIPTION



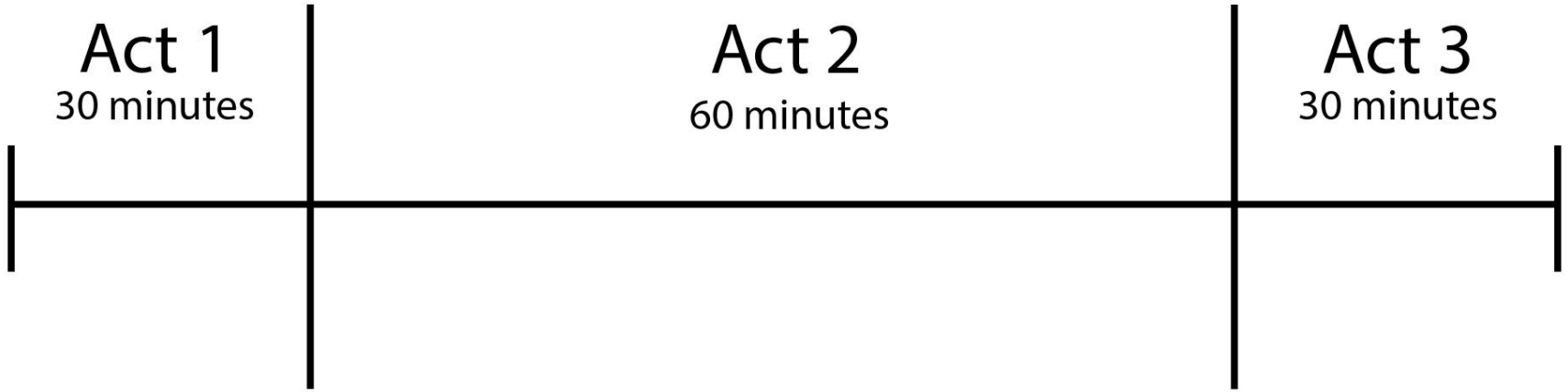
GIGI
I've been dying to do a seance all week! Do you have any candles?



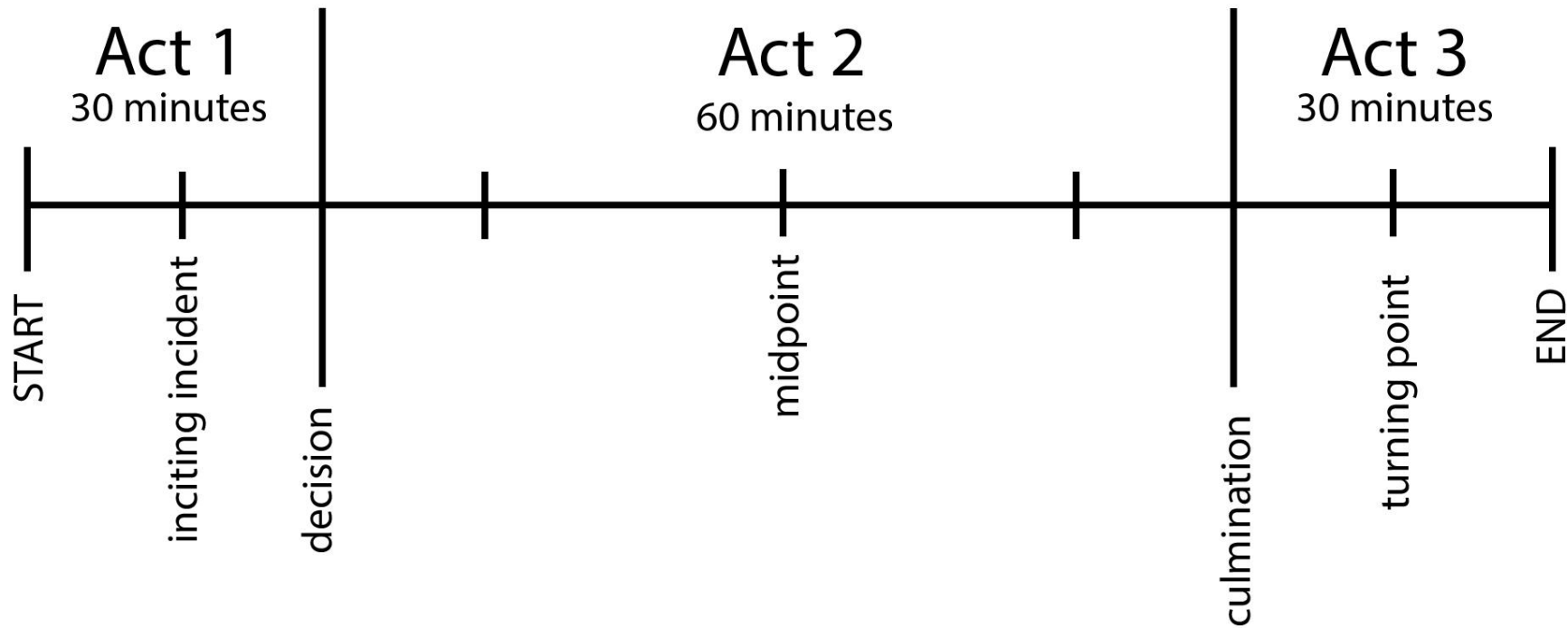
Stella gestures at the collection of candles right beside the coffee table. She taps her foot until Gigi finally sees them.

GIGI (CONT'D)
Oh, there they are! Duh.

Screenplay Structure



TOTAL TIME = 120 min



Structure by Act

Act 1

- Status quo and exposition
- Inciting incident
- Character's major decision

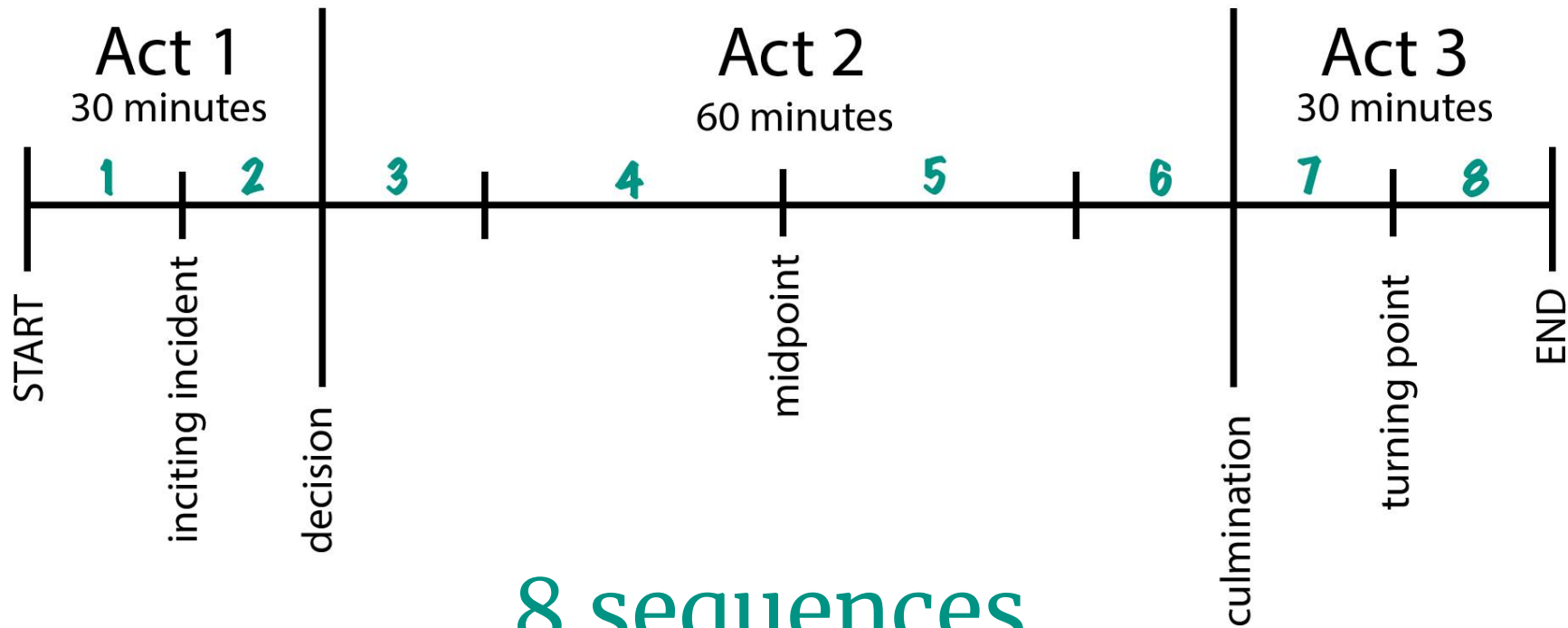
Act 2

- Journey, main tension/big question
- Midpoint
- Turning point

Act 3

- Thematic aspect, now what?
- Climax
- Resolution



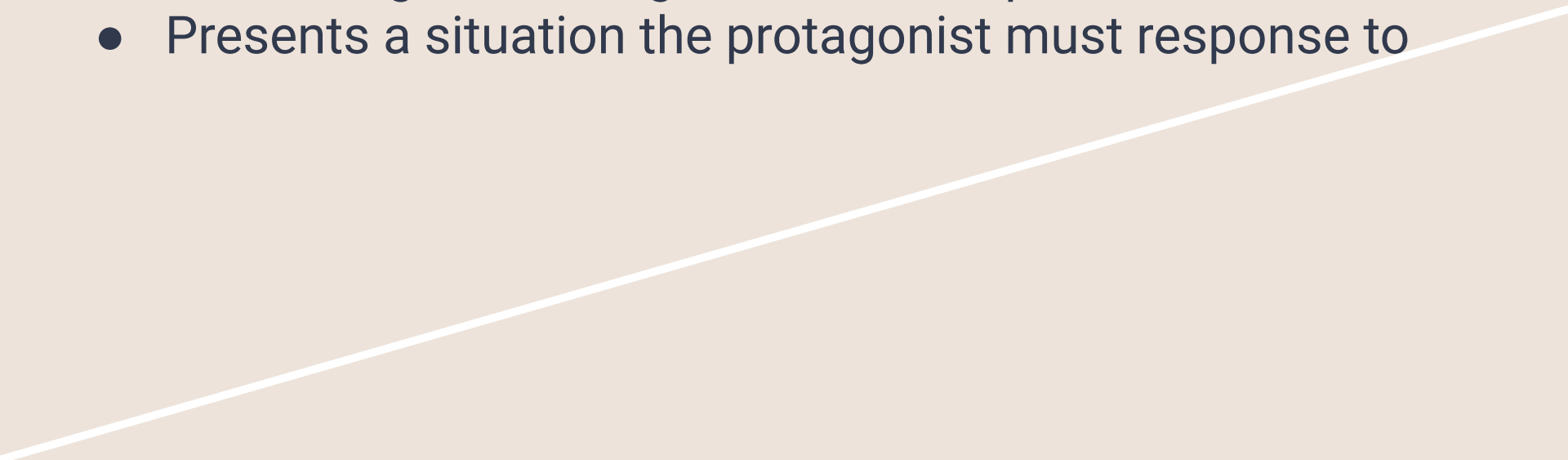


8 sequences

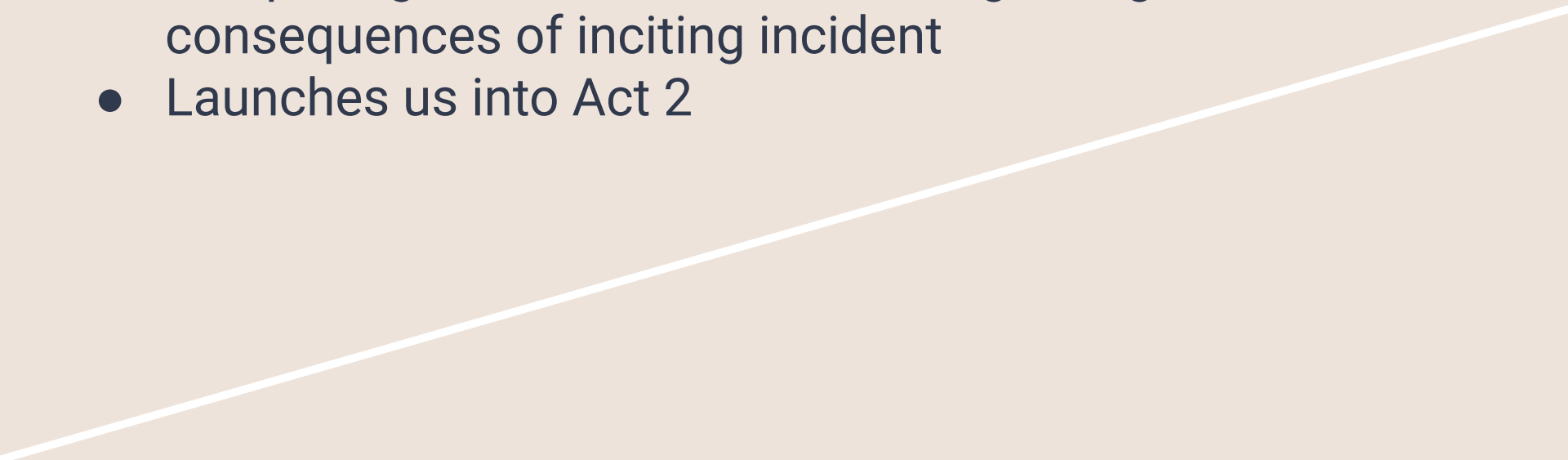
Status Quo : start

- The way things were aka “normal”
- The protagonist’s life before the inciting incident
- No real sense of urgency or suspense/drama
- Despite the normalcy, the audience gets the sense that something is off

Inciting Incident : 10%

- Something that changes the status quo
 - Presents a situation the protagonist must response to
- 

Act Turn (1) : 25%

- The protagonist make a decision regarding consequences of inciting incident
 - Launches us into Act 2
- 

Midpoint : 50%

- The point of no return
- Something pivotal happens that changes the course of the narrative
- Super emotional
- Nothing will ever be the same
- Complicates matters in a whole new way
- Everything before the midpoint sorta don't matter anymore

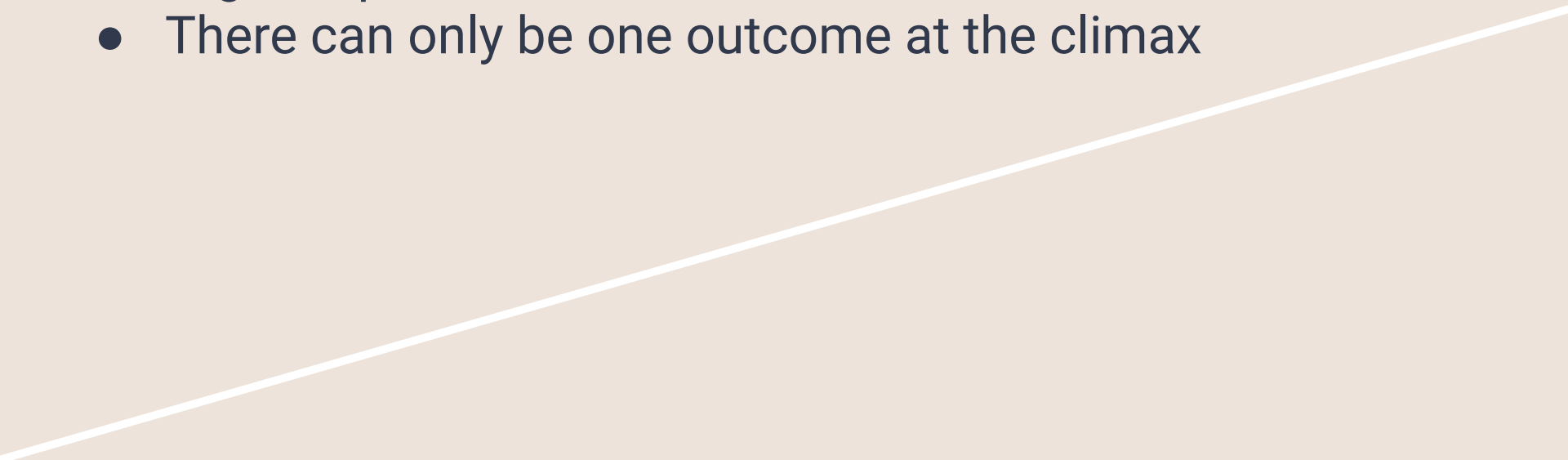
Act Turn (2) : 75%

- Culmination
- The big question carried out by Act 2 has been answered
- Launches us into Act 3
- Poses a new dramatic question or the “now what?”

Turning Point : ~85%

- The most important moment in the scene this falls in
- When the protagonist's want/desire is either accepted, rejected, or changed altogether
- Typically 2 characters have clear wants that clash
- Pro tip: use a prop to act as a visual symbol of the moment

Climax : 90-99%

- Highest peak of the film
 - There can only be one outcome at the climax
- 

Resolution : end

- Should happen immediately after the climax
- Must end the story completely
- Ideally viewed as the only possible way of ending the story
- Could end as the basis of a new status quo

Screenplay Story Building

Story vs. Plot

Story

- Idea about something
- Adaptable to any format
 - E.g. film, book, comic, etc.
- The chronological order of all the events

Plot

- Referring to structure of events that occur throughout the film
- Not necessarily in chronological story order

Developing Your Scene

Questions to Ask

1. Whose scene is it?
2. What does the character want?
3. What's getting in the way of what the character wants?
4. Who or what is helping the character?
5. Does the character get what they want?
6. How does the character's emotional arc change?

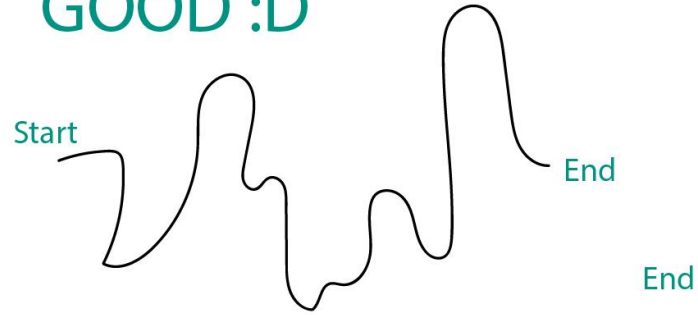
Pro tips for your scene

Contradiction is everything

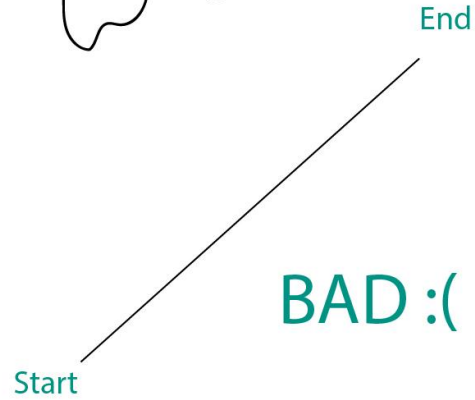
- Person A wants pizza. Person B wants sushi. They can only place a single order.

Aim for a good distribution of high points and low points for your character's emotional arc.

GOOD :D



BAD :(



SCENE'S EMOTIONAL ARC

Characteristics of a Sequence

- Collection of scenes that build a larger conflict
- Breaks film down into chunks
- Usually 10-15 minutes long
- Typically 8 sequences (Hollywood standard)
- Each has its own energy and goal
- Maintains the film's running "through line"
- Tracked by paying attention to what the character wants

Developing Your Sequence

Questions to Ask

1. Whose sequence is it?
2. What does the character want?
3. Who or what is hindering/conflicting?
4. Who is helping the character?
5. What is the event?
6. Does the character get what they want?
7. What is the emotional arc?

Task → Specific → Structure → Obstacles

Characteristics of the Task

- Should be specific to story world, film structure, and film setting
- Isn't usually the thing the audience relates to most
- Sequence breakdowns done according to task
- We watch the film for the task
- Usually an external necessity

Goal → Universal → Emotion

Characteristics of the Goal

- Something the entire audience can relate to
- Has an emotional aspect the audience can identify with
- The reason why we care about the film
- Typically an internal necessity

Crucible

- The running through line
- Organic structure of the film
- Holds character dynamics and bonds together
- Mandates that characters stick together until the very end of the film
- Provides a reason why the character does what they do throughout the film

Going in late, exiting soon

Going in late

- Don't add lots of unnecessary context
- Trust the audience to pick up cues

Exiting soon

- End the scene right after we see its climax
- Leave some imagination to the audience, but there must be a resolution

The **task** and **goal** must work together to have a single, cohesive story.

The **task** makes the **goal**
harder to achieve.

Developing Characters

About Your Protagonist

- Active → pushes narrative forward
- Their perspective is presented in majority of film
- Experiences the most significant emotional arc
- Has a want/desire
- Could learn a lesson
- Can be lame so long as the film itself is cool!

Developing Your Protagonist

- Must have some inner conflict
- Clear perspective established early on
- Choose character's age wisely
- Don't make them too self-aware at first
- Make them go through the most interesting situation!

About Your Antagonist

- Wants the exact opposite of what your protagonist wants
- Gets in the protagonist's way
- Creates tension
- Doesn't have to be a person!
 - E.g. society, poverty, anxiety

How to make people care about the protagonist

- Usually helps if they're likeable
- Audience should at least understand where the protagonist is coming from on one level
- A redeeming character arc
 - E.g. mean → nice
- Depth of character relationships is meaningful and nuanced
- First set up the character, then include emotionally engaging backstory

Supporting Characters

- What's their purpose in the story?
- What's their own story?

General Tips

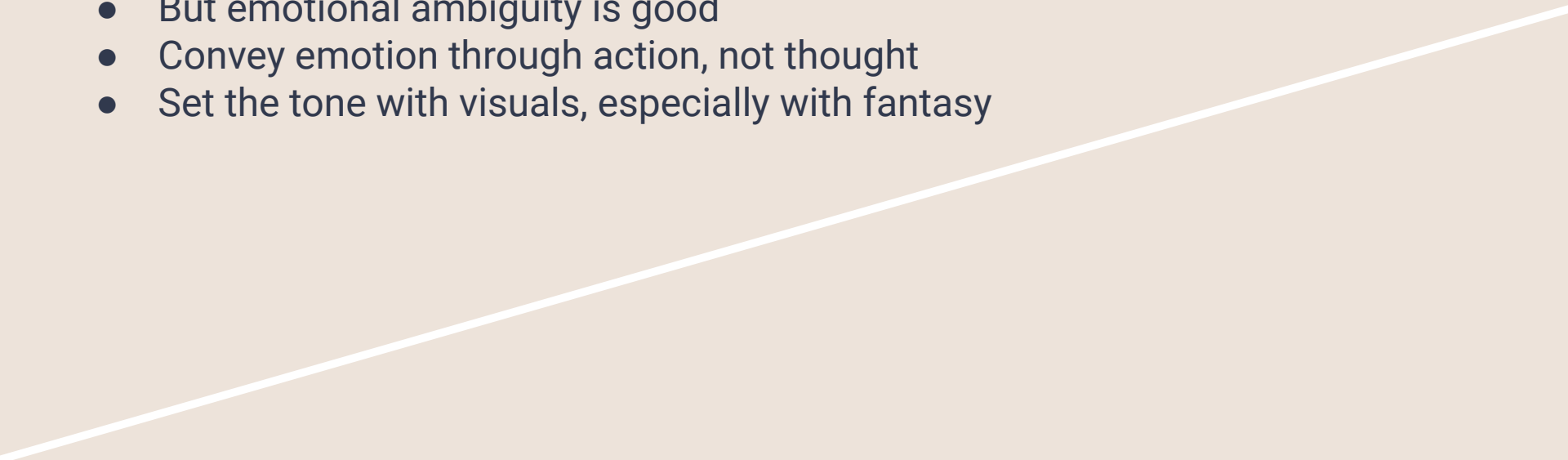
Syntax, Format, Language

- Don't be prosaic
- Description = visual
- 1 page = 1 minute
- Pay attention to white space on page
- Avoid writing too much camera angle
- Keep it in the present tense ALWAYS (even flashbacks)
- Honestly, avoid retrospective plot
- Avoid adverbs
- Keep things to the point, especially with comedy
- Avoid phone calls and texts on screen
- Don't make the dialogue give away all the info
- Tension thrives on silence and interesting dialogue
- For humor, keep the tone consistent

Writing Characters

- Don't write what the characters are thinking
- No one cares what your characters are wearing
- Don't make character descriptions judgmental unless it's for a trope
- Make action and description reflect the character's stakes
- Tiny bits of logic don't matter if there's intense emotion
- Give protagonists some agency in making decisions to drive the narrative forward
- A scene can't randomly have 2 characters just talking about life
- Dynamic relationships are best, where 1 has power and the other is subordinate

Visuals, Action, and More

- Visual ambiguity is bad
 - But emotional ambiguity is good
 - Convey emotion through action, not thought
 - Set the tone with visuals, especially with fantasy
- 

Synopses vs Treatments

Fleshing Out Your Film

Film Synopsis

- 1 page long
- 2-3 pages MAX
- Detailed and constructed pitch of your film

Things to Cover

1. **Logline:** short 1-sentence summary of film
2. Who's your protagonist? Their age?
3. Where and when is this set?
4. Status quo?
5. What happens?

Film Treatment

- Like 10 pages
- Folks have gone wild and written like 50 pages-- don't do that unless you're famous
- Fully detail all ~8 sequences
- Pay attention to structure milestones
 - E.g. inciting incident, midpoint, turning point

Resources

Stuff to Check Out!

Software

- [Final Draft](#) (industry, \$\$\$)
- [Celtx](#) (free!)

Websites

- [Script Reader Pro](#) (help articles)
- [Screen Craft](#) (competitions)

THANK YOU!