

STRUCTURE HACK

HOW TO MASTER SCREENPLAY STRUCTURE
THROUGH A SIMPLE PRACTICAL EXERCISE

BY



THE IMPORTANCE OF SOLID STRUCTURE

Solid structure, as we all know, is the foundation of crafting a good screenplay. It is one of a screenplay's most crucial core components and immediately gives the writer who has mastered it an edge over one that hasn't. An agency or studio reader simply won't keep reading unless they are able to note a clear set of turning points along the way, like a Call To Action, Act 1 Break, Midpoint, etc.

So, how do you nail structure so it becomes water-tight and second nature? Let's find out.

STRUCTURE HACK

In a nutshell you simply write an outline of a film as you watch it — scene by scene — and then break it down into its acts, sequences and segments. This is an invaluable exercise and we can't stress enough the benefits it can bring to your sense of story structure.

Here's how you do it:

1. CHOOSE A MOVIE

We suggest sticking to movies in the genre you write in so you get to really familiarize yourself with its conventions. Also, pick a Hollywood film post-1980, as these will generally be easier to break down (but more on this later).

2. WRITE AN OUTLINE

Instead of just watching the film, write down on your laptop what you see — i.e. a simple summary of each scene as it happens. Sentences should be short and to-the-point, describing only the basics of what happens and avoiding extraneous details. You may find it hard to keep up at first, but don't worry you'll get quicker the more you do.

Let's take a look at the 90s classic *There's Something About Mary* as an example. The scene in which Ted is questioned by the police over the highway murders should read something like this:

"At a police station, Ted is interrogated by two cops. Having found a dead body in his car they think he's a serial killer, but Ted thinks he's been arrested for picking up the hitch-hiker."

It's always a good idea to start with a location, as in "at the police station" in order to establish the scene. Only the major beats of the scene need recording, so you should never write anything about how someone's dressed, for example, unless it's important to the story.

Just write out what happens in each scene and by the end of the film you should end up with an outline three to five pages long. Once this is done, the next stage is to break it down.

3. BREAK DOWN YOUR OUTLINE

Now's the time to break down your outline into acts and sequences, noting the major plot points along the way.

The first plot points you'll want to add to your outline are the big "traditional" ones such as act breaks, the Call to Action, and Midpoint, etc. These big plot points should be fairly easy to add to your outline as they're usually pretty obvious in most Hollywood movies.

It's fairly easy to see that the Midpoint in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is when Indy and Marion get thrown into the Well of Souls and the Nazis steal the ark. Or that the end of Act 2 in *Manhattan* is when Mary tells Isaac she's still in love with Yale, and then Isaac confronts him in his class.

But if you really want to get ahead of the game, you can also break down the three acts into sequences and the sequences in segments.

We go into this in much more detail in our book *Master Screenplay Sequences*, but below you'll find an example of an outline of *Bridesmaids* broken down into its acts, sequences, and segments.

BRIDESMAIDS OUTLINE

ACT ONE

Sequence A — Lillian asks Annie to be her Maid of Honor (- / +)

I

Annie has awkward sex with Ted at her house. It's clear she's way more into him than he is into her. **(inciting incident / screenplay inciting incident)**

The next morning, Annie does herself up in the mirror and sneaks back into Ted's bed. He says he doesn't want a relationship and tells her to leave. **(call to action)**

Outside, she can't get out the high gate, so she starts to climb over but it opens as she's halfway across — a car is waiting to get in. **(negative big event)**

II

In a park, Annie works out with her friend, Lillian, near a workout class. The instructor calls them freeloaders and tells them to get lost.

In a cafe, Annie and Lillian discuss Lillian's relationship with Doug. Annie defends herself for having sex with Ted. Lillian says she should stop it because he's an asshole.

They walk to work and on the way stop outside her failed bakery store...
(midpoint)

Annie works in a jewelers. She offends an Asian couple and they leave. Her boss reprimands her and brings over another worker to show her how it's done. Her boss tells her she only got the job because of her mom.

At home, Annie's flatmate, Brynn, talks about tattoos. Her brother, Gil, arrives and asks her about the rent. Annie tells him she'll have it soon. **(all is lost)**

III

Annie arrives at Lillian's who tells her she's engaged. Yay! She asks Annie to be her maid of honor. **(positive climax / screenplay call to action)**

Annie lies in bed thinking...

Sequence B — Annie realizes Helen's a rival (+ / -)

I

Annie arrives at her mom's to take her to the engagement party. Her mom says she can't go anymore because she's going to AA, even though she's never had a drink. Her mom gives her advice and asks if she wants to move in with her. **(inciting incident)**

Annie arrives at the party in her crap car. **(call to action)**

She goes inside a big house and meets Lillian who introduces her to Rita who talks about her two kids. Then, Annie meets Becca and Kevin: irritating newlyweds who mistake a man standing near her as her boyfriend. Doug's inappropriate sister, Megan, tells a weird story. Annie meets Helen: a stuck up woman who's married to Doug's boss. **(positive big event)**

II

Later, Lillian's dad makes a speech. He hands over to Annie who makes a short, but sweet, speech. Helen makes a big speech about friendship. Not wanting to be out-done Annie makes another speech, this time about friendship. **(midpoint)**

The rivalry has already started — both Helen and Annie want the last word on the speech. **(all is lost / screenplay big event)**

Later, Annie talks crap about Helen to Lillian who says she should hang out with Helen as a favor. **(negative climax / screenplay big decision)**

III

Annie drives home complaining to herself about Helen and swerving all over the road. She gets pulled by a cop, Rhodes. She proves she's not drunk but he gives her a ticket for not having a tail light. He remembers her cake shop and her ex and lets her off the ticket as long as she gets the light fixed. **(b-story)**

Montage: At home, Annie looks at stuff about her cake shop / She bakes a cake and eats it, thinking...

ACT TWO

Sequence C — Annie messes up the dress-fitting (+ / -)

I

At a tennis court, Helen tells Annie people change, but Annie says they stay the same. Helen's step-kids arrive. They're rude to her and leave. **(inciting incident)**

Later, Annie and Helen play tennis doubles. It's very competitive and escalates into deliberately hitting each other in the body with tennis balls.

At home, Annie tells her flatmates Brynn needs to pay rent. Brynn confesses she read Annie's journal.

Annie takes Lillian and the bridesmaids to a Mexican restaurant. Judging from the exterior, they're not impressed.

Inside, Annie tells them about the wedding shower — French themed. Helen says they should think about it. They come up with suggestions. **(call to action)**

Annie takes to the girls to a dress shop, but can't get in. Helen gets them in. **(positive big event)**

II

Inside, they check out the dresses. Helen wants a \$800 dress. Lillian says a major designer has done her wedding dress.

Later, they wear the dresses, still trying to decide, but soon they all start to feel ill. **(midpoint)**

Lillian arrives, wearing the wedding dress. Everyone rushes to the bathroom, but Helen's fine. Annie also says she feels fine. **(all is lost)**

III

Lillian rushes outside but can't make it to the bathroom in time and poops in the road. **(negative climax / screenplay big decision failure)**

Annie drives a shell-shocked Lillian home.

Sequence D — Annie ruins the Vegas trip & loses Maid of Honor duties (+ / -)

I

Annie lies in bed with Ted. She invites him to the wedding, but he doesn't want to go. She says she'll take a guy called "George" she just made up.

Annie runs into Rhodes at the gas station. **(inciting incident)**

They sit on his car, chatting about weddings. He tells her to set up a new bakery. She says she could be a cop.

Later, he teaches her to read license plates by the side of the road. They chase after a speeding car.

Annie send the girls an email about the bachelorette party. **(call to action)**

She receives a call from Helen straight away about using a lake house. Rita calls and suggests Vegas. Becca calls about Vegas. Megan calls... it's Vegas. Turns out Helen has already called everyone. **(positive big event)**

The girls walk in slo-mo to the plane.

II

On the plane, Helen tells Lillian that Annie refused to fly first class with them. Annie gets nervous, sitting next to another nervous flyer. Annie comes up to Lillian and Helen who gives her a sleeping pill. Rita can't believe Becca hasn't been with anyone but her husband. Megan talks to a guy who she thinks is an Air Marshall. Helen joins Annie who gives her a Scotch. Annie appears in first class, drunk. She argues with the steward and leaves. **(midpoint)**

Later, Annie appears in first class again. The steward throws her out again.

Megan flirts with the guy in her seat. Becca and Rita get drunk. Annie sees something on the wing and freaks out. Everyone freaks out.

They land in Wyoming and are escorted off the plane. **(all is lost)**

III

They sit on a bus. Annie apologizes to Lillian who says she's giving the maid of honor responsibility to Helen. Annie's sad, but agrees. **(negative climax / screenplay midpoint)**

Sequence E — Annie loses Rhodes, gets fired & moves in with her mom (- / - -)

I

Annie drives and spots Rhodes in his car. **(inciting incident)**

They talk in a bar about her screw up. He says she should open the bakery again. He says he's been thinking about her. **(call to action)**

They burst into his house, kissing. **(positive big event)**

II

Next morning, Annie wakes up to find Rhodes smiling at her. She's a bit unnerved and so he goes to the kitchen.

Later, Annie joins Rhodes to find he's set up a mini-bakery for her. He wants to reignite her passion for baking. She's not impressed and leaves, saying he doesn't know her and that last night was a mistake. **(midpoint)**

Annie drives and leaves a message for Lillian about running out on Rhodes.

Brynn wakes Annie up — a package has arrived for her. Annie opens Helen's wedding shower invite.

At work, a girl comes in asking for a BFF bracelet. Annie is rude to her and they argue.

Annie is fired. She collects her stuff and leaves.

Annie listens to a voice mail from Rhodes saying he won't bother her anymore. **(all is lost / screenplay midpoint failure)**

III

Gil and Brynn tell Annie they're kicking her out the apartment. Annie moves into her mom's. **(negative climax)**

Annie looks at her old store.

Sequence F — Annie falls out with Lillian (+ / -)

I

Annie drives down a long driveway — Helen's house. **(inciting incident)**

Annie is escorted on a horse up to the massive house. She enters. **(call to action)**

In the garden, she meets Lillian who says everything's okay. **(positive big event)**

II

Later, Lillian opens her presents. Annie made her a montage of photos and all her favorite stuff. Helen outdoes her by giving Lillian tickets to Paris. Everyone claps. Annie's jealous and freaks out, calling Helen a lesbian. **(midpoint)**

Annie says this isn't the Lillian she knows. Annie goes outside and destroys the huge wedding cookie. Lillian tells her not to come to the wedding and Annie leaves. **(all is lost / screenplay all is lost)**

III

Annie drives down the freeway. Megan drives up beside her and causes her to pull over. By the side of the road, a car runs into Annie's car, but drives on. Her car won't start.

Later, Annie receives a lecture by the side of the road from Rhodes about her tail-light. He says she just left after making him think she liked him. Ted pulls up in his car and Rhodes drives off.

Later, Ted drives Annie home. He says she can give him a blow-job if she wants. She tells him to pull over, gets out and walks. **(negative climax)**

ACT THREE

Sequence G — Annie & Lillian make up and Lillian gets married (- / +)

I

At home, Annie watches Castaway, crying. Megan arrives with a pack of puppies and tries to give her a pep talk. She pushes Annie around, telling her to fight for her life. Megan tells her life her story. They hug. **(inciting incident)**

Montage: Annie bakes / She introduces her mom to Bill / She leaves an "I'm Sorry" cake for Rhodes but he doesn't take it / She drives past again and it's being eaten by raccoons.

Annie's mom enters asking about Lillian's wedding. Annie's not going. **(call to action)**

Later, Annie opens the door to Helen who tells her Lillian's missing.
(negative big event)

II

They drive. Helen apologizes to Annie and cries about not having any friends.

Annie stops at Rhodes' car parked by the side of the road. She asks for his help but he doesn't listen. **(midpoint)**

Montage: Annie goofs around driving past Rhodes to try and make him laugh and change his mind / Finally, he gives in.

Rhodes traces Lillian's cell to... her apartment. Annie apologizes. He says goodbye.

Annie and Helen arrive at Lillian's and Annie goes in alone. She finds Lillian in her bed. Lillian says it's been hard to do the wedding without her. They both apologize.
(positive climax / screenplay climax)

III

Later, Annie laughs at Lillian's dress.

The wedding: Lillian gets married. Annie looks on. Helen introduces the band — Wilson Phillips. Everyone dances. **(screenplay dénouement)**

Later, Lillian leaves with her husband. Megan tells Annie her prank. Helen arrives and Annie says they should hang out. They hug. Rhodes arrives. They kiss. He has to leave on a call and she goes with him. **(b-story climax)**

THE END

NOTE

You don't have to break down each outline you write with this much detail. As long as you pinpoint the major turning points — three acts and seven or eight sequences — you're golden.

QUICK REVIEW

So here are the steps you need to take to master screenplay structure:

- 1. Write outlines movies as you watch them.** You will find a list of movies by genre below which you can have a go at outlining. They are all fairly straightforward i.e. no multi-strand or flashback orientated movies and so should be easy to break down.
- 2. Break down your outlines into acts, sequences and segments.** It can be hard to spot where all the sequences and segments lie at first, but it will get easier the more outlines you do. If you need more help, though, in our book *Master Screenplay Sequences*, we go into much more detail about how sequences underpin traditional three act structure.
- 3. Don't make the mistake of only writing a few outlines.** Repeat until you're one-hundred percent happy you understand screenplay structure. That could mean doing fifty, or two-hundred, but essentially the more outlines you write the better. You will soon not only start to gain more of a sense of structure but also of characterization, scene construction, dialogue, etc,

So, there's no more time to sit around watching films simply for enjoyment — get out that laptop and start typing while you watch!

THANK YOU

Thanks again for signing up to our newsletter, we'll have more great hacks, tricks and tips coming your way soon. If you have any questions about our Structure Hack, drop us a line at hello@scriptreaderpro.com. And if you feel like leaving a review for Script Reader Pro you can do so on [Facebook](#) or [Google+](#). Thanks again, we *really* appreciate all your support!

Talk soon,

The ScriptReader Pro Team

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