

THE BEST SCREENWRITING STRUCTURES YOU CAN APPLY TO YOUR SCRIPT

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Introduction

Screenplay structure has nothing to do with mythology or saving a cat — it's all about basic choices a screenwriter can make to determine how they want to tell their story. It's actually pretty easy: you just have to know what structures you can play with. Taking inspiration from [Cinefix's video](#) on movie structure, we offer ten screenplay structures that can be applied to any genre and story.

These ten structures are what you can choose from when it comes to deciding how to tell your stories. Structure is less about hitting certain beats at certain page numbers and more about deciding what type of framework you want to build your story on.

We'll break down the basics, offer some examples, and let you take it from there as you continue on your screenwriting journey.

Chapter 1: Three-Act Structure

Let's be honest. When you break everything down to the core — despite the many gurus that push their own philosophies on structure — everything has a beginning, middle, and end. This has been the story structure followed by humankind since the days of telling stories around the village fire or etching cave paintings on stone walls depicting worthy stories of hunting for prey (beginning), confronting the prey (middle), and defeating the prey (end).

The three-act structure in cinema is the most basic and pure structure that most films — no matter what gurus and pundits say — follow.

There is the setup, the confrontation, and the resolution. Four-act structures, five-act structures, and the seven-act structures for television movies — as well as many other variations — are just additions to the core three-act structure.

Even the core story structure of screenplays that utilize the following nine other structures that we present below can usually be broken down into three acts, but just portrayed in different ways.

When you choose to use the basic three-act structure for your screenplay, you're offering perhaps the most accessible story design for audiences.

Each scene matters. Each scene progresses directly to the next, carrying the momentum of the story forward in natural progression — void of any excess. There is the setup of the character and their world, followed by a conflict that they are either forced to face or choose to take on, and then we're led to the resolution.

Movies like ***Star Wars***, ***The Fugitive***, ***Witness***, ***Raiders of the Lost Ark***, and ***Die Hard*** are perfect examples of the three-act structure. Anyone, in retrospect, can apply varying degrees of guru philosophy and beat sheets to each of them, but in the end, those types of stories showcase true beginnings, middles, and ends with constant forward progress as every scene builds towards the finale.

Chapter 2: Real-Time Structure

Rather than piecing together a screenplay only using the story's most vital parts — as you do in the three-act structure — other scripts represent their stories in a single uninterrupted stream. The causality of whatever conflicts are thrown at the characters is presented in real time.

Movies like [*12 Angry Men*](#), [*My Dinner with Andre*](#), [*Nick of Time*](#), [*United 93*](#), and [*High Noon*](#) are prime examples of the real-time structure.

There are no breaks, no time jumps, no flashbacks, or anything of the sort. The story is presented unbroken and unfiltered. Every moment is important, and screenwriters that attempt to apply this structure to their stories must understand that. There is a reason why Jack Bauer in the real-time structured television series **24** was never seen going to the bathroom in a single 24-hour period — every moment has to matter.

These types of screenplays can be tricky in that respect, so you often have to find a way to drive the action and the motivation of the characters. The ticking time clock is perhaps the best way to accomplish that.

If you look at *High Noon* and especially *Nick of Time*, the action and drama shifts into gear because of a ticking time clock.

Something is coming by a certain time in *High Noon*, and the marshal must prepare.

The father in *Nick of Time* must do what the villain says if he wants to ever see his daughter again — and the clock is literally ticking.

If you choose to tell your story within a real-time structure, understand that you have to commit to the rules — not one second in the chosen moment of your character's life can be skipped.

The wonderful aspect of this structure is that the tension involved in the story is escalated and so much more impressive when delivered honestly.

Chapter 3: Multiple Timeline Structure

This is perhaps one of the most complicated structures in screenwriting. You take a few otherwise linear stories and mix them up together.

Films like *Intolerance*, *The Fountain*, *Cloud Atlas*, and even *The Godfather Part II* embrace the multiple timeline structures.

Most of the time the stories are blended together and peppered with the same themes, emotions, and messages, but aren't always specifically and directly connected. One story's causality doesn't always affect the others. The sole connection between them is the shared themes, emotions, and messages — beyond production choices like using the same actors to portray different characters, showcasing the same locations in different time periods, etc.

The magic of this structure is that it can give the audience the sense that all life in the universe is somehow connected.

If you do decide to connect the storylines somehow — as Francis Ford Coppola did in *The Godfather Part II* — each story can have an even deeper meaning. When we see the rise of Michael Corleone's power matched with the more subtle rise of his father's power, we begin to feel the duality of the two stories that could have otherwise been movies of their very own.

However you do or don't connect these multiple timeline stories, this structure offers writers a way to go beyond conventional storytelling.

Chapter 4: Hyperlink Structure

Linear stories, like those found in the three-act structure, showcase somewhat of a domino effect. Each domino falls forward, causing the next to fall, and the next, and the next, until a final resolution is made. It's telling a story from Point A to Z, never missing an alphabetical point in between.

But some cinematic stories like those found in *Magnolia*, *Crash*, and *Babel* are like multiple timeline structures — but with each and every story hyperlinked, like multiple different rows of falling dominoes weaving in and out of each other but always ending in the same resolution at the end. The cause and effect of each story lead everything together.

These types of stories give the audience a sense of how our individual lives can be so interconnected. The cause and effect of what we do or don't do can have a parallel cause and effect in other people's lives.

In *Magnolia*, Paul Thomas Anderson crafted a story where eight characters and their stories slowly started to connect as the film went on.

The key aspect of hyperlink stories is that by the end, each story and character has to masterfully impact the others, where if you were to remove one storyline or character, the overarching story wouldn't work. It's hard to master, and even some of the hyperlink films we've mentioned may not add up to a perfect degree, but the experience of that attempt can be invigorating for a reader or audience.

And it makes the read of such a screenplay even better because it engages the reader as they wonder if and how all of these stories and characters are truly connected.

Chapter 5: Fabula/Syuzhet Structure

While you may have never heard of this type of story structure, it's actually more common in movies than you may think. [*Fight Club*](#), [*Casino*](#), [*American Beauty*](#), [*Goodfellas*](#), [*Forrest Gump*](#), [*Interview with the Vampire*](#), and [*Citizen Kane*](#) are prime examples.

This structure comes to us from Russia, using terms that originated from Russian formalism and employed in narratology that describe narrative construction.

Fabula is the meat of the story while the **Syuzhet** is the narration and how the story is organized.

This specific structure employed by American cinema often utilizes original organization by showing the end first, and having the audience view how they got there. The story is about the journey and focuses on the **how** as opposed to the **what**.

Citizen Kane begins with the death of the title character as he mutters "Rosebud" on his deathbed. His life is then presented through flashbacks interspersed with a journalist's present-time investigation of Kane's life.

The **fabula** of the film is the actual story of Kane's life the way it happened in chronological order, while the **syuzhet** is the way the story is told throughout the film.

Forrest Gump opens with the near-ending of the story as Forrest waits for a bus. We learn the **fabula** of the story through his flashbacks as he tells various bus stop companions certain chronological stories from his life. The **syuzhet** of the story is present in the scenes at the bus stop being intertwined with those stories of his life. Had the film been presented in the three-act structure, we would have opened with Forrest Gump as a boy and progressed through to the point of him waiting at the bus stop. The moments of Forrest talking to others at the stop would have been unnecessary and the overall voice-over narration may not have been used at all.

Interview with the Vampire opens with vampire Louis being interviewed by Malloy. Louis recounts his days as a vampire hundreds of years prior, with his maker Lestat. That is the **fabula** of the story while the interview scenes represent the **syuzhet**. The events of the stories (**fabula**) themselves exist independently from the telling of it (**syuzhet**).

It's a unique structure often used in true stories, but can just as easily be creatively applied to fictional ones as well. The structure gives us an added sense of narrative and excuses the otherwise looked down upon usage of voiceover narration. So if you're feeling the need to have a voiceover in your script, one of the best ways to do that is to

write within a ***Fabula/Syuzhet*** structure.

Chapter 6: Reverse Chronological Structure

One of the more original structures we've seen in movies is telling stories in reverse chronological order. Now, this differs from the **Fabula/Syuzhet** structure. While we do start with the end — or near end — we aren't going back to a chronological storyline. We're slicing the screenplay into pieces and then arranging the story using those sections from end to beginning with each scene itself told in order.

Memento is the prime example of this structure. It brilliantly uses the reverse order of scenes to create unique tension and wonder of who the character is, why he is doing what he's doing, and whether or not the characters involved in his story can be trusted. With each regression of the story — as opposed to progression in three-act structures and chronological applications — we learn a little more, while at the same time more questions are presented.

The beginning of the story becomes the main cause of tension, curiosity, and intrigue.

If you [watch the film in chronological order](#), it's a completely different experience that erases much of the tension and intrigue.

Reverse chronological structures are difficult to construct. It's not as simple as slicing that script into chunks and reversing the order of those story chunks. You have to still write a compelling and engaging story that plays better in that reverse order, leaving cliffhangers and presenting questions that readers and audiences may ponder — all while answering questions at the same time.

Chapter 7: Rashomon Structure

This structure is derived from the classic Akira Kurosawa masterpiece of the same name — [*Rashomon*](#).

It centers on telling the same story from different points of view. These stories can often use elements of the **Fabula/Syuzhet** Structure — having a character within the **syuzhet** remembering or recalling events — but the **fabula** is different here because it's the same story told multiple times from the perspective of different characters.

While the story itself is the same, it's different because of the way it is being told.

This allows the audience to remember that there are always different sides to the same story. It allows you, the writer, to inject even more creativity and ingenuity into your screenplays. But it's a tricky slope to maneuver because the attention to detail has to be near perfect to evenly relate each perspective. And each perspective has to offer individual worthiness as a self-contained story— while at the same time presenting an overarching story that has equal worth and intrigue.

Chapter 8: Circular Structure

The circular narrative is a story that often ends where it starts and starts where it ends.

Once again, this structure utilizes elements from the ***Fabula/Syuzhet*** Structure. The ***syuzhet*** is more represented as a Mobius Strip, as if the story were a single flat line of paper that is twisted in the middle and then joined at the ends, creating a circle — albeit with a twist. At the same time, the ***fabula*** is like an ouroboros symbol — a snake or dragon eating its own tail.

Time travel stories are the most prominent circular structure narratives and utilize the circular aspect of the narrative in the most literal of ways. Movies like [*Back to the Future*](#), [*Primer*](#), [*12 Monkeys*](#), and [*Looper*](#) showcase characters that go back or forward into time, affecting their past or future selves or events — usually showcased by playing with the paradox visuals of ending and beginning with the same scenes, moments, and locations, or variations of them.

But non-time travel stories can embrace this structure as well, in almost any genre, and can handle the circular aspect in more loose fashion. Homer's *The Odyssey* opens with Odysseus leaving Ithaca to go to war and then later closes with his heroic return to the same location. It's a subtle circular narrative, but circular nonetheless.

Chapter 9: Non-Linear Structure

Non-linear films like *Pulp Fiction*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Annie Hall*, and *Dunkirk* tell stories by jumping backward, forwards, and sideways in time to tell a single story. Such stories are not presented in chronological order, or the narrative does not follow the direct causality pattern of the story events that you'd find in a three-act structure or through the average fabula — the meat of the story.

The concept behind non-linear films is to challenge the way we think we remember things — or how characters recall their own memories of experiences they've been through.

Memento is often attributed to a non-linear structure but is actually differentiated by working in reverse chronological order. However, that reverse chronological order can still be perceived as a linear narrative. Non-linear stories go back and forth and sometimes sideways. We're not going from Point A to Z or from Point Z to A hitting every point in between. Instead, we're maybe going from Point A to Point D, then jumping to Point L and Point M, only to jump back to Point B and Point C.

This challenges the reader and the eventual audience. They have to remember where certain scenes and storylines left off and they have to be able to pick the story back up almost immediately.

Chapter 10: Oneiric Structure

Oneiric Structure is unique as it depicts a cinematic story using dream-like visuals, exploring the structure of dreams, memories, and human consciousness.

Subtle usage of this structure is best represented by Cameron Crowe's [Vanilla Sky](#). The lines between real world and dream world get more and more blurry as the film moves forward. We're not sure what is real and what is not.

[The Tree of Life](#) embraces the Oneiric Structure tenfold. Just watching the film feels like you are witnessing someone's life — and the life of the planet overall — through vague and half-remembered memories and dreams.

These types of films are often presented by auteurs, likely because telling such stories — especially in the extreme cases like Terrence Malick's **The Tree of Life** — often requires one single vision and visionary.

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