

THREE ACT WHAT?

Great Story Structure

nibbles| blueprint series

GET YOUR COPY OF THE INTERACTIVE THREE ACT WHAT? THE BEST \$5.00 YOU'LL EVER SPEND AS A WRITER! Click here: livingstonmckay.com/three-act-what

SJ Murray lives in Austin, TX, with her feisty wheaton-poo, Coco, and travels frequently to both coasts. As a professor in the Honors College at Baylor University, she teaches great texts, creative writing and story rhetoric. She earned her PhD in literature at Princeton and studied screenwriting at UCLA.

SJ is the credited writer of several documentaries for PBS and a feature film, consults on numerous projects, and coaches authors.

READY TO OUTLINE?

Ready to begin outlining your movie? Begin by filling in this simple **Beat Sheet**, based on what you've learned in *Three Act What?* Then, you will be ready to move on to **Step Outline**. Don't forget, first, to study character development in *Character Matters*. And join us on Twitter [@storyrhetoric](https://twitter.com/storyrhetoric) if you have questions or would like to schedule a review of your outline over Skype.

Title

Date

Logline

OPENING IMAGE

This is the **point of attack** of your movie. You'll want to try a few in order to pick a scene that best introduces the premise and themes of your movie.

The World As We Know It, or Ordinary World

It's time to build a **sequence** of scenes to introduce the reader (and audience) to your protagonist. Remember, show, don't tell. Actions and interactions are more powerful than background and **exposition**.

As part of this sequence, you want to signal that **a storm is brewing**. Things may seem well in the ordinary world, but we are on the brink of a change.

Inciting Incident, or Catalyst

One day, everything changes. Remember that we're just lighting the fuse here. The stick of dynamite hasn't exploded yet. But this is the day everything changes, even if the protagonist doesn't know it yet.

Dilemma

By p. 17 at the latest, you want to up the ante: the stick of dynamite explodes. The protagonist is now faced with a decision, should I stay, or should I go?

Protagonist Must Commit to Crossing the Threshold

It's time to commit to the quest! (Reread Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey* if you need a refresher on this beat.) Something happens that prompts the protagonist to a pro-active decision. Remember, the protagonist cannot be swept along in the action. A decision must be made and clearly presented in the story.

Adventure Sequence

We're in the **extraordinary world** and it's time to engage us in the **adventure**. Remember, you don't want to up the stakes until the midpoint. This is your opportunity to present us with the rules of the new world and present us with events that will allow your protagonist to grow along the arc. (See *Character Matters* for details on the additional beats for character development.)

Gaining Support

Don't forget to introduce your B-character. Their main purpose is to present a new influence for the protagonist. Interacting with this character will help your protagonist grow through the character arc. (By p. 30)

Adventure Sequence Continues

The adventure sequence continues to build towards the critical midpoint.

Midpoint

At the midpoint, the **tide turns**. If the movie is to end with the triumph of the underdog values, the midpoint represents a **setback**. Most importantly, the protagonist moves **from passive to active**. This decision changes the course of the movie, and is a direct cause of the **brick wall** (although the protagonist doesn't know that yet.)

All Downhill: Attack of the Dominant Values

Things go from bad to worse. The second half of act two represents a series of ever-increasing setbacks for the protagonist.

The Brick Wall

Blake Snyder, in *Save the Cat*, likes to think of this as the "All Is Lost." The Brick Wall represents the ultimate low for the protagonist. But most importantly, the protagonist now faces a decision that amplifies the commitment to the quest at the end of act one: it's time to pick up the sledge hammer, break through the wall, and **recommit to the (redefined) quest**. The protagonist finally gets the big picture and is ready to enter act 3.

The Final Face-Off

Act 3 is defined by three major movements: (1) the beginning: the protagonist enacts their plan; (2) middle: the plan seems to work, but often reveals a trap (3) end: the protagonist becomes isolated and moves to confront the antagonist in a final face-off. Each of your parts must push us towards the **ultimate confrontation**, no matter the genre of your script. Conflict is at an all-time high and culminates in the **climax** of the movie.

Resolution

We turn the cameras off after a meaningful scene that shows us how the ordinary world has changed as a result of the events portrayed in the movie. This is the **new world** and **new equilibrium**.

*Congratulations! Once you revise and rework these elements of your movie to your satisfaction, you're ready to move to **Step Outline**. If you like these ideas, wait until you read SJ's whole book on three act structure.*

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