Screenplay Structure Simplified

[Scott Myers](#)

"Plot is critical, but how a writer **gets** to plot is even **more** critical."

Recently, I stumbled across this infographic in my social media feed:

DAN HARMON c.2012	BLAKE SNYDER c.2005	ROBERT McKEE c.1999	SYD FIELD c.1979	JOSEPH CAMPBELL c.1949	GUSTAV FREYTAG c.1863	KISHOTENKETSU c.500	ARISTOTLE c.335 BC	COMPARATIVE NARRATIVE STORY STRUCTURES
YOU a character in a zone of comfort	SET-UP Opening Image Theme Stated Catalyst	INCITING INCIDENT	SETUP Inciting Incident	SEPARATION/ DEPARTURE Call to Adventure Refusal of the Call	EXPOSITION INCITING INCIDENT	INTRO	BEGINNING Prologue Parados (Parade/Ode)	INTER-CONNECTED TALES
NEED something	Debate BREAK INTO TWO	PROGRESSIVE COMPLICATIONS	Plot Point 1 CONFRONTATION	Acceptance of Call Supernatural Aid Crossing Threshold Belly of the Whale	RISING ACTION	DEVELOPMENT	MIDDLE Episode(s)	
GO enter an unfamiliar situation	B Story Fun and Games		Pinch 1	INITIATION Road of Trials			Stasimon(s) (Commentary)	
SEARCH adapt to it	Midpoint Bad Guys Close In		Midpoint	Meeting the Goddess Woman as Temptress	CLIMAX		Episode(s)	
FIND what they wanted	All is Lost	CRISIS	Pinch 2	Atonement w/ Father Apotheosis	FALLING ACTION	TWIST	Stasimon(s) (Commentary)	
TAKE pay its price	Dark Night of the Soul		Plot Point 2	The Ultimate Boon			Episode(s)	
RETURN back to where they started	BREAK INTO THREE Finale	CLIMAX	RESOLUTION	RETURN Refusal of the Return Magic Flight	RESOLUTION	END	Stasimon(s) (Commentary)	
CHANGE now capable of change	Final Image	RESOLUTION	Climax	Rescue From Without Return Threshold Master of Two Worlds Freedom to Live	DENOUEMENT		END Exodus	

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It's ostensibly about story structure, but note that Syd Field, Robert McKee, Black Snyder, and Dan Harmon are all known for their theories about screenplays or episodic TV. And, of course, The Hero's Journey as explored by

Joseph Campbell has been adapted to screenplays by [Chris Vogler](#).

The chart looks complicated, doesn't it? Different jargon, different points of emphasis, different structures. What strikes me as more significant is how — with the exception of Dan Harmon — these approaches to story (read: screenplay) structure reduce structure to plot.

That is only *half* the story!

Yes, plot is critical, but how a writer **gets** to plot is even **more** critical. Because where there's Action in the External World of the plot, there is a character's Intentions in their Internal World defining why they act the way they do. And where there's Dialogue in the External World of the plot, there is a character's Subtext in their Internal World conveying deeper meaning in what they say.

Thus, while there is a story's Physical Journey through time and space as evidenced by the events of the Plot, there is also a story's Psychological Journey as characters, most notably, the Protagonist responds to the events of the plot and interacting with other characters by going through a change, what Campbell calls *transformation*.

Therefore, we can simplify screenplay structure by focusing on the psychological journey of the Protagonist with four movements:

Disunity (Act One)
Deconstruction (Act Two Part A)
Reconstruction (Act Two Part B)
Unity (Act Three)

These four movements represent the *unity arc*. If you immerse yourself into the life of your Protagonist, you will discover a synergy between their *internal life* (psychological journey) and the *external world* (physical journey) which feeds the character's transformation process.

Note: Some Protagonists don't have a unity arc in which they move from Disunity to Unity, while some Protagonist don't change, but rather change others. However, a vast majority of movies feature a Protagonist who does integrate key aspects of their psyche and end up on a path toward wholeness.

My advice: Start with your characters, most critically the Protagonist. Dig into who they are at the beginning of the story, the disjunctive nature of their psyche. Zero in on their *need*, that aspect of their psyche which lies latent within and over time emerges into the light of consciousness. Consider how that process transforms the nature of the Protagonist as they move forward through the plot.

"The goal of the individuation process is the synthesis of the self." — Carl Jung