

# Three Things About Screenplay Structure

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Do not let page count concerns stifle your creativity... or your story.



Recently, I have had quite a few emails from writers concerned about where certain events hit in terms of page

count. Or worried their first act is too long. Or their third act is too short.

I wrote response and here it is: Three Things About Screenplay Structure

1. There isn't one right way to tell a story. No single formula or screenplay paradigm to fit all stories. However, due to the influence primarily of Syd Field and *Save the Cat*, there is a certain amount of conventional wisdom about how and when certain things *should* happen. Ultimately, that is bull shit (I'm talking from a purely creative standpoint). Yet, it's something we have to be aware of.

By the way, this is one of the downsides of the preponderance of various screenplay formulas. Script readers and creative execs, who may not have much in the way of training with regard to Story pick up these formulas and assess scripts on that basis. The problem is while one paradigm may work for one story, it doesn't work for another. So you have readers critiquing stories based on a narrow formulaic take on script structure.

My point: Be aware of these prejudices — and finally, that's what they are — but **DON'T LET THEM RULE YOUR CREATIVITY!**

2. Write your story the way **YOUR STORY NEEDS TO BE TOLD!** If your first act absolutely *needs* more setup so it ends on 35, so be it. If, on the other hand, your story *demand*s you leap into Act II by 15, go for it.

Stories are ORGANIC. This is one big honking reason why writing to formula is so dangerous because you can strangle the creative energy right out of your script.

That said, you have to be **confident** about your connection to your story to verge significantly away from general expectations on the part of Hollywood readers. Don't think of page count as restricting you rather as touch points to make sure your story *absolutely* needs to veer from the norm.

If it does, you **must** write it that way. In all things, the STORY rules. Not the formula. Not the paradigm. Not the conventional wisdom. Not the prejudices. The Story is King, Queen, Prince, Princess, Duke, ruler of all. Ultimately you are beholden to your Story and that's it.

3. In my humble opinion, the single best way for you to go into the story and have its structure emerge organically is by immersing yourself in the life of your characters. After all, it's *their* story, no one knows their experience better than they.

My advice: When you do story prep, start and end with your characters. Follow *their* lead. Trust they will lead you into and through the story's structure.

There's also this: At the end of the day, readers want to **feel** something. How do they do that? Through their connections with characters and the experiences they have in the plot.

I just read a great interview with the three time Oscar winning film editor and sound engineer Walter Murch (*Apocalypse Now, Ghost, The English Patient*) and he said something interesting:

“Our medium is called motion pictures, but it could also be called **emotion pictures**. That seems to be the main driving force behind it. When I made a list of six criteria for determining what kind of things you weigh when you choose to cut from one shot to another, emotion is at the top.

Identification with characters is the main thing that will create emotion. You feel as if you are with these people, whoever they are onscreen, and you want them to succeed against all odds. And you are rooting for them and you’re agonizing with them when they fail and you’re feeling great when they succeed. There are several ways to mine the vein of emotion, but that’s the main one.”

We do a great deal of thinking when working on story structure, but in actuality we should be doing at least as much **feeling** in the process. How? By going into our characters... and see where they take us.

So again regarding story structure:

- Be aware of conventional wisdom and reader expectations, but understand there are no rules in this regard, no ‘right’ way to tell a story.
- Write your story the way it needs to be told.

- The best way to have story structure emerge organically and tap into its emotional life is by immersing yourself in the lives of your characters.

When our focus is on the characters and what is happening in each scene, rather than page counts, we are much more likely to get in touch with the emotional life of the story.