

Screenplay Structure

The Five Key Turning Points of All Successful Scripts

by Michael Hauge

Hollywood movies are simple.

Though writing a successful Hollywood movie is certainly not easy, the stories for mainstream Hollywood films are all built on only three basic components: character, desire and conflict.

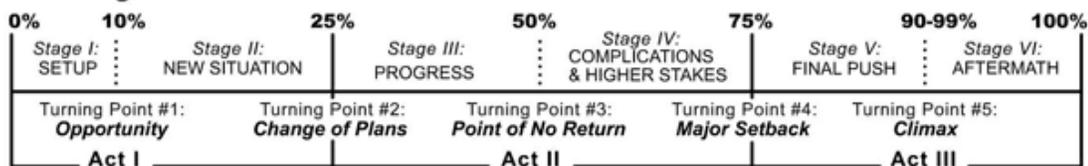
Film stories portray heroes who face seemingly insurmountable obstacles as they pursue compelling objectives. Whether it's Clarice Starling trying to stop Hannibal, Captain Miller Saving Private Ryan, or Billy Elliott trying to gain admission to a ballet school, all these protagonists confront overwhelming conflict in their pursuit of some visible goal.

Plot structure simply determines the sequence of events that lead the hero toward this objective. And here's the good news: whether you're writing romantic comedies, suspense thrillers, historical dramas or big budget science fiction, all successful Hollywood movies follow the same basic structure.

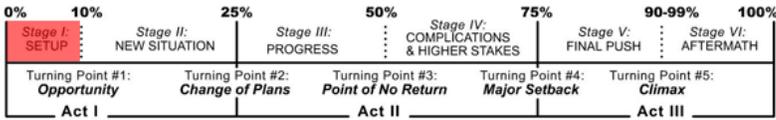
In a properly structured movie, the story consists of six basic stages, which are defined by five key turning points in the plot. Not only are these turning points always the same; they always occupy the same positions in the story. So what happens at the 25% point of a 90-minute comedy will be identical to what happens at the same

percentage of a three-hour epic. (These percentages apply both to the running time of the film and the pages of your screenplay.)

Michael Hauge's Six Stage Plot Structure



In the explanation that follows, I want to take two recent blockbusters through this entire structural process: Susannah Grant's screenplay for *Erin Brockovich*; and *Gladiator*, written by David H. Franzoni, John Logan and William Nicholson. As different as these two films are in style, genre, length and subject matter, both have made more than a hundred million dollars at the box office, both were among the most critically acclaimed films of 2000, and both employ the same basic plot structure.

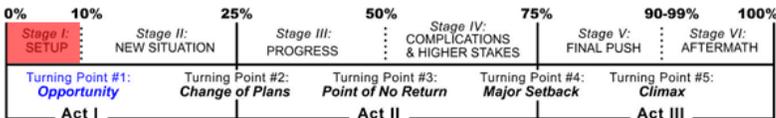


STAGE I: The Setup

- **Erin Brokovich:** Erin is a broke, unemployed single mother who can't find a job, gets hit by a car, and loses her lawsuit.
- **Gladiator:** Maximus, Rome's most powerful, and most popular, general, leads his troops to victory in their final battle.

The opening 10% of your screenplay must draw the reader, and the audience, into the initial setting of the story, must reveal the everyday life your hero has been living, and must establish identification with your hero by making her sympathetic, threatened, likable, funny and/or powerful.

Cast Away transports us into the world of a FedEx executive, shows him as likable and good at his job, and creates sympathy and worry when he must leave the woman he loves at Christmas to fly off in dangerous weather. Or think of Lowell Bergman's mysterious, threatening pursuit of a story at the beginning of **The Insider**. These setups pull us out of our own existence and into the captivating world the screenwriter has created.



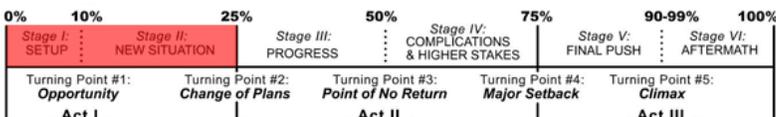
TURNING POINT #1: The Opportunity (10%)

- **Erin Brokovich:** Erin forces Ed Masry to give her a job.
- **Gladiator:** Maximus is offered a reward by Emperor Marcus Aurelius, and he says he wants to go home.

Ten percent of the way into your screenplay, your hero must be presented with an opportunity, which will create a new, visible desire, and will start the character on her journey. This is the point where Neo is taken to meet Morpheus and wants to learn about **The Matrix**, or where Ike gets

fired and wants to go meet the **Runaway Bride**.

Notice that the desire created by the opportunity is not the specific goal that defines your story concept, but rather a desire to move into...



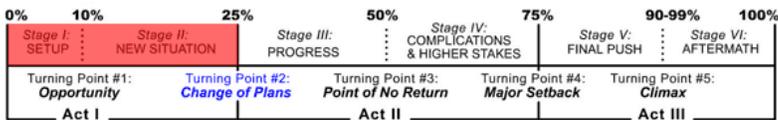
STAGE 2: The New Situation

- **Erin Brokovich:** Erin begins working for Ed Masry's law firm, meets her neighbor George, and starts investigating a case in Hinkley, California, but then gets fired
- **Gladiator:** Maximus is asked by the dying Emperor to take control of Rome and give it back to the people, in spite of the ambition of his son Commodus.

For the next 15% of the story, your hero will react to the new situation that resulted from the opportunity. He gets acclimated to the new surroundings, tries to figure out what's going on, or formulates a specific plan for accomplishing his overall goal: Fletcher has to figure out that he's been cursed to tell the truth in **Liar, Liar**, and **Mrs. Doubtfire** devises a plan for seeing his children.

Very often story structure follows geography, as the opportunity takes your hero to a new location: boarding the cruise ships in **Titanic** and **The Talented Mr. Ripley**; going to Cincinnati to bury his father in **Rain Man**; the President taking off on **Air Force One**.

In most movies, the hero enters this new situation willingly, often with a feeling of excitement and anticipation, or at least believing that the new problem he faces can be easily solved. But as the conflict starts to build, he begins to realize he's up against far greater obstacles than he realized, until finally he comes to...



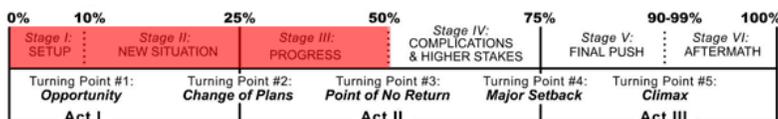
TURNING POINT #2: The Change of Plans (25%)

- **Erin Brokovich:** Erin gets rehired to help win a suit against PG&E.
- **Gladiator:** Maximus, after learning that Commodus has murdered his father, vows to stop the new emperor and carry out Marcus Aurelius' wishes.

Something must happen to your hero one-fourth of the way through your screenplay that will transform the original desire into a specific, visible goal with a clearly defined end point. This is the scene where your story concept is defined, and your hero's outer motivation is revealed.

Outer motivation is my term for the visible finish line the audience is rooting for your hero to achieve by the end of the film. It is here that Tess discovers that Katherine has

stolen her idea in *Working Girl*, and now wants to close the deal herself by posing as a broker. This is what we're rooting for Tess to do, and we know that when she's accomplished this goal (or failed to), the movie will be over. Please don't confuse outer motivation with the inner journey your hero takes. Because much of what we respond to emotionally grows out of the hero's longings, wounds, fears, courage and growth, we often focus on these elements as we develop our stories. But these invisible character components can emerge effectively only if they grow out of a simple, visible desire.



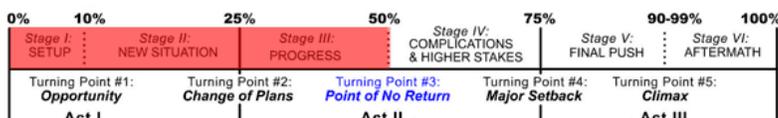
STAGE III: Progress

- **Erin Brokovich:** Erin gets some Hinkley residents to hire Ed to represent them, and gets romantically involved with George.
- **Gladiator:** Maximus is taken to be killed, escapes to find his family murdered, and is captured and sold to Proximo, who makes him a powerful gladiator.

Pat gets involved with the woman of his dreams in *There's Something About Mary*.

This is not to say that this stage is without conflict. But whatever obstacles your hero faces, he is able to avoid or overcome them as he approaches...

For the next 25% of your story, your hero's plan seems to be working as he takes action to achieve his goal: Ethan Hunt begins closing in on the villain in *Mission: Impossible 2*;



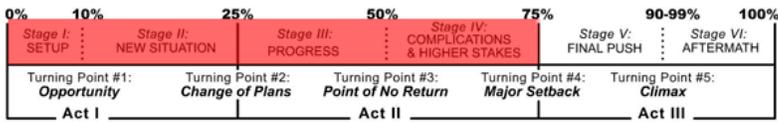
TURNING POINT #3: The Point of No Return (50%)

- **Erin Brokovich:** Erin and Ed file the lawsuit, risking dismissal by the judge, which would destroy any hope of a settlement.
- **Gladiator:** Maximus arrives in Rome, determined to win the crowd as a Gladiator so he can destroy Commodus.

now your hero must burn her bridges behind her and put both feet in. (And never let it be said that I can't work two hackneyed metaphors into the same sentence).

At the exact midpoint of your screenplay, your hero must fully commit to her goal. Up to this point, she had the option of turning back, giving up on her plan, and returning to the life she was living at the beginning of the film. But

It is at precisely this moment that Truman crosses the bridge in *The Truman Show*, and that Rose makes love with Jack in *Titanic*. They are taking a much bigger risk than at any previous time in these films. And as a result of passing this point of no return, they must now face...



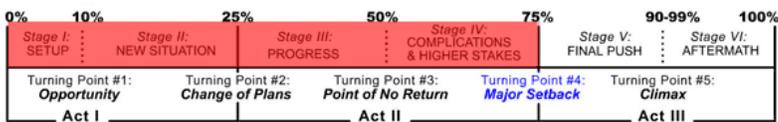
STAGE IV: Complications and Higher Stakes

- **Erin Brokovich:** Erin sees less of George and her kids, while Ed brings in a big firm that alienates the Hinkley plaintiffs.
- **Gladiator:** Maximus becomes a hero to the Roman people and reveals his true identity to Commodus.

For the next 25% of your story, achieving the visible goal becomes far more difficult, and your hero has much more to lose if he fails. After Mitch McDeere begins collecting evidence against *The Firm* at that movie's midpoint, he now

must hide what he's doing from both the mob and the FBI (complications), and failure will result in either prison or death (higher stakes).

This conflict continues to build until, just as it seems that success is within your hero's grasp, he suffers...



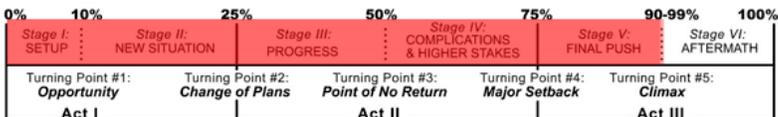
TURNING POINT #4: The Major Setback (75%)

- **Erin Brokovich:** Most of the plaintiffs withdraw due to the bungled efforts of the new lawyers, and George leaves Erin.
- **Gladiator:** Maximus refuses to help the leader of the Senate, and Commodus plots to destroy both Maximus and the Senate.

Around page 90 of your screenplay, something must happen to your hero that makes it seem to the audience that all is lost: Carol dumps Melvin in *As Good As It Gets*;

Morpheus is captured in *The Matrix*. If you're writing a romantic comedy like *Working Girl* or *What Women Want*, this is the point where your hero's deception is revealed and the lovers break up.

These disastrous events leave your hero with only one option: he must make one, last, all-or-nothing, do-or-die effort as he enters...



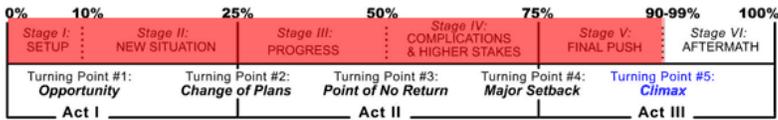
STAGE V: The Final Push

- **Erin Brokovich:** Erin must rally the Hinkley families to agree to binding arbitration, and find evidence incriminating the PG&E corporate office.
- **Gladiator:** Maximus conspires to escape from Proximo and lead his former troops against Commodus.

Beaten and battered, your hero must now risk everything she has, and give every ounce of strength and courage she possesses, to achieve her ultimate goal: *Thelma and Louise* must outrun the FBI to reach the border; and the

Kennedy's must attempt one final negotiation with the Soviets in *13 Days*.

During this stage of your script, the conflict is overwhelming, the pace has accelerated, and everything works against your hero, until she reaches...



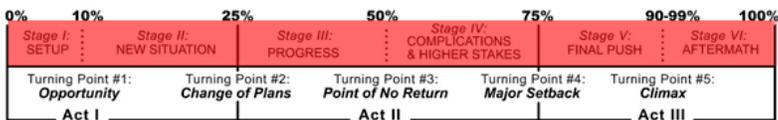
TURNING POINT #5: The Climax (90-99%)

- **Erin Brokovich:** Erin and Ed win a \$330 million dollar settlement, and George returns.
- **Gladiator:** Maximus has his final battle with Commodus in the arena.

Several things must occur at the climax of the film: the hero must face the biggest obstacle of the entire story; she must determine her own fate; and the outer motivation must be resolved once and for all. This is the big moment where our

heroes go into the *Twister* and the Jewish factory workers make their escape in *Schindler's List*.

Notice that the climax can occur anywhere from the 90% point to the last couple minutes of the movie. The exact placement will be determined by the amount of time you need for...



STAGE VI: The Aftermath

- **Erin Brokovich:** Erin gets a \$2 million bonus, and continues working with Ed.
- **Gladiator:** Maximus is united with his family in death, and his body carried away in honor by the new leaders of the Roman republic.

No movie ends precisely with the resolution of the hero's objective. You have to reveal the new life your hero is living now that he's completed his journey.

In movies like *Rocky, Thelma and Louise* and *The Truman Show*, there is little to show or explain, and the writer's goal is to leave the audience stunned or elated. So the climax occurs near the very end of the film. But in most romantic comedies, mysteries and dramas, the aftermath will include the final five or ten pages of the script.

Understanding these stages and turning points provides you with a powerful tool for developing and writing your screenplay. Is your story concept defined at the one-quarter mark? Is your hero's goal truly visible, with a clearly implied outcome and not just an inner desire for success, acceptance or self worth? Have you fully introduced your hero before presenting her with an opportunity around page 10? Does she suffer a major setback 75% of the way into your script?

But a word of caution: don't let all these percentages block your creativity. Structure is an effective template for rewriting and strengthening the emotional impact of your story. But you don't want to be imprisoned by it. Come up with characters you love and a story that ignites your passion. Then apply these structural principles, to ensure that your screenplay will powerfully touch the widest possible audience

Michael Hauge is a featured speaker and producer of the best-selling DVD series, "The Hero's 2 Journeys." He is also the author of "Writing Screenplays that Sell" and "Selling Your Story in 60 Seconds". Michael is a featured speaker at filmmaking and screenwriting schools and seminars. He consults frequently with some of Hollywood's most successful writers and directors. You can find Michael at www.screenplaymastery.com.