

## LESSON PLAN 5 - PLOT

In this session, students will use what they have learned to devise a plot structure. They will look at existing structures, learn about fun industry guidelines like the 60 minute explosion or the crucial horror opener, and then learn about the Universal Narrative - Introduction, Complication, Rising Action, All is Lost, Climax, Resolution.

**PLOT:** Plot is the structure of events in your story. Event follows event follows event. More than that, event triggers event. They're all connected. One can't happen without the other.

Picture a rollercoaster - rising action, getting tenser and tenser and tenser and more exciting, until there is a peak, a climactic moment, and then a slowing down as we bring everything to a close.

### 5.1 - INTRODUCTION

Plot is the most formulaic and structured part of writing for the screen. In a book, you can add as many extra scenes or chapters as you like, because it will only cost you the price of the pages when you go to produce it.

In film, every extra minute filmed is probably costing you around twenty grand. With that in mind, every second you put on screen must matter and be worth it. More than that, every student at this age level will have sat through a show that was too long, or a scene that dragged, so they are intimately familiar with the concept of timing and pacing in a movie - i.e., how quickly or slowly the events play out.

#### 1.2 - THE UNIVERSAL STRUCTURE

This structure is so named because it is everywhere. Every movie, every television show, most novels - all follow this structure. And that doesn't make it clichéd - it simply makes this structure road-tested. It works. It's worked a million times. And more than that, it works satisfyingly - in a way that delivers everything people want from a story.

As before, we will introduce the students to the concept, see examples, and then get them to work on their own.

## 1. THE INTRODUCTION

This is the grunt work part. It is a scene or collection of scenes that show us who our main character is, the where, the when, our supporting cast. It introduces our character's values - who and what they love. Most importantly, it gives us a baseline for the main character's normal - whether that's running a coffee shop or fighting aliens on the moon.

### EXAMPLES

Spiderman starts off as a normal kid. Thor starts off as a Norse God with a whole kingdom that loves him. The main character of the Lego Movie starts off a little left out and a little lost, but a fundamentally cheerful character.

## 2. THE COMPLICATION

Something happens to throw the main character's life off-track. A new want, a new quest, a new challenge, a threat. They must deal with this, even if they don't know it yet, and that is what makes our stories exciting. Usually, there is an internal complication (our Lego character wanting to be liked) and an external complication (a villain) Dealing with one will solve the other. This is an important point for students who find

it difficult to make their stories longer - more complications mean a longer story.

#### EXAMPLES

Spiderman gets bitten and gets powers - that's a complication, but a good one. Villains appear - that's a bad complication. Learning to deal with his powers means learning to face these villains. Thor loses his kingdom and his powers. That's a problem. But the real complication is the arrogance that caused him to lose his kingdom in the first place.

### 3. RISING ACTION

Trying to deal with this complication gives us interest. Maybe the first time they try and fix the problem, they fail. Maybe they fix it, but another one crops up. Maybe in fixing it, they realise there is a worse one coming. Either way, things are getting tenser and more complicated.

#### EXAMPLES

Spiderman tries and fails. Thor is hunted by government agents. These threats aren't enough to end the story or our hero, but they do make things more stressful, and give us exciting moments.

### 4. THE ALL IS LOST MOMENT

Something goes *badly* wrong, and it looks like our hero has broken things beyond repair. A fight with a friend, the villain escaping, the hero losing their powers - this is the lowest moment of the story, and it's there because our hero needs that final push to overcome their flaw.

#### EXAMPLES

It's two thirds of the way through your romantic comedy, and the hero has just had a huge fight with her love, and it's raining. Hans in Frozen

turns out to be evil, and Anna is now frozen and fading away. It's now or never.

## 5. THE CLIMAX

All these complications build to the climax. This is the make or break moment, the moment where everything you've been building up to pays off. The hero has learned what they need to learn, they've accepted their role, they've reached out and apologised, they've seen the light. Now, they're ready.

### EXAMPLES

This moment will often be signalled by repetition of a line from the beginning, or the reappearance of an old character, or the hero saying something that the film or book has been trying to teach them all along. Spiderman goes back to his old costume and stops relying on Iron Man's tech or his approval. Thor acts selflessly instead of selfishly.

## 6. RESOLUTION

This is the dust settling. The moment of reflection. Losses are counted. Friends are reunited. We see who has survived, who has changed, who's in love, who's broken up. Because stories are a change machine. Plot has to have an effect on your characters, otherwise it may as well not have happened.

### EXAMPLES

Often the big musical numbers at the end of animated movies are there to give quick epilogues to various characters (including the villain, to reassure us they were not killed when they were defeated)

### 1.3 - CLASS EXERCISES

These steps can be further reinforced by the fact that not just every movie presents these steps, but also every TV show. Every episode will have its own contained version of the universal structure, as well as a structure that plays out over the entire series.

You can even refer back to the trailer you used in Lesson Plan 3 and see that it will follow the same structure - though often without the resolution so that the ending of the film is somewhat in doubt.

Challenge students to plot out the narrative of one of your selected movies, or a class text with which they will all be familiar.

Discuss the structure with them. Why do they think it works? What is their favourite part of the structure to watch? Is there a way to change the structure around? Some movies will show you the climax first and then jump all the way back to the introduction, so you have a taste of a future scene but don't know the set-up.

As with all of these blueprints, it is important that students do not believe they work simply because they have been told they work. They should be encouraged to interrogate them, try them out for themselves, argue over which parts they do not agree with, and seek to break down and reassemble them for their own stories.

When they are sufficiently familiar with this structure, you can then invite each group to put together their own structure for their movie. Start with bullet points for each step of the structure and, when these are agreed, get them to expand these into paragraphs. Ask the students to keep in mind what villains might be doing during the moments they are not 'on-screen' as well, so they also feel like well-rounded characters who are busy during the plot.

When this is complete, students may present their work to the rest of the class and field questions as before.

It's worth also encouraging students to think about whether the chronological structure above is how the *audience* experiences the plot. Many movies will give us a glimpse of the climax or the complication first, and then jump back to the introduction so we spend the runtime wondering how our hero ends up in that position. Students can have fun working out how their story might look out of sequence and what effects that might create for a viewer.