

SAVE THE CAT!®

CRASH COURSE

ESSENTIAL VOCABULARY

ALL STORIES ARE ABOUT TRANSFORMATION This is not a Hollywood term... it is our motto! It should be printed out and put on top of our computers as a reminder of why we do this job. No story is worth telling unless change occurs in the hero—or in us, the audience. The bigger the growth, the more epic the tale. Each beat of the story demands change. And we must bend our stories to make sure each beat is being satisfied, so our hero, and our audience, are wrung out by the end.

SAVE THE CAT!® The idea that to make an audience root for the hero, we need to show the quintessence of her character. An obvious way is to show her doing something nice for someone else, but the possibilities are limitless. The key idea is to get the audience on the hero's side, whether she is likeable or not. That way, they will follow her through the story. Please realize, this term does not mean your hero must rescue an animal! The character should do something positive that is consistent with her personality and the theme and story you're creating.

SPINE OF THE STORY, THE How the hero begins, changes, and grows throughout the story—that's the spine, the thing writers and audiences track to make sure they are witness to a well-structured tale. The five questions to ask to straighten any spine are: Who's the hero? What's the problem? How does the story begin and end? What are the tangible and spiritual goals? What is the story "about," what is its theme? Answer these five questions and you can create a story that resonates.

TANGIBLE AND THE SPIRITUAL, THE There are two stories in every story: the thing that's happening on the surface, known as *plot*, and the thing happening below the surface, known as *theme*. The surface world is all material, tangible with concrete goals, obstacles, and consequences. The goals are specific too, such as winning a trophy, a girl, or a legal case. The below-the-surface world is the spiritual part; it is the lesson the hero learns from the plot—and the real story. Remember: *A Story* = plot = wants = tangible. And *B Story* = theme = needs = spiritual.

THESIS, ANTITHESIS, SYNTHESIS (a.k.a. Act One, Act Two, and Act Three) Thesis, antithesis, and synthesis describe the thematic progression of the hero's journey. In Act One, the hero's world is set up. In Act Two that world is turned on its head; it is the upside-down version of what he left behind. But by mastering this surreal new world, the hero gains the knowledge to combine what was and its opposite to form a synthesis of everything he has learned. That synthesis occurs in Act Three. It is not enough for the hero to survive the journey; he must transform his world in order to truly be great.



THE BEATS

BEAT 1: OPENING IMAGE The first thing the audience sees: a visual representation of the hero before the journey begins. It sets the tone, mood, scope and setting, and it serves as a contrast to the film's Final Image beat.

BEAT 2: THEME STATED The hero in the story isn't complete, and at some point, we will reveal what he needs to learn in order to grow. This message is often stated by another character, and it opens up a big question in the hero's life. Although the hero doesn't know it yet, he will understand this lesson by the end of the story.

THEMATIC PREMISE What is this movie about? Yes, even the silliest monster movie or most slapstick comedy has to be "about something." If it's not, it's not a good movie. In essence every good movie is a debate about the pros and cons of a particular point of view. It is a question raised and answered by the movie. The place to stick that question is up front, loud and clear. It is frequently spoken by a minor character to the hero in the form of a question early on and sets the Debate into motion that will be proven, one way or another, in the course of the movie. The question and Debate is the movie's thematic premise.

BEAT 3: SET-UP This beat, which takes place throughout the beginning of the story, introduces the setting, main characters and details about their behaviors and flaws. The hero is often shown at home, at work, and at play, and we see the problems in the hero's life, or the *Six Things That Need Fixing*. In his Thesis World, the hero is confronted with *Thesis World and Stasis = Death*, the idea that something must change in her life.

AT HOME, AT WORK, AND AT PLAY The world of the hero needs to be set up when we start every story. And even though not every story has these scenes exactly, it must in some form. Think about the Set-Up for Russell Crowe in *Gladiator*: *At work*, he's a great Roman General; *at home*, his wife is waiting; *at play*, the after-party of his troops' Teutonic victory reveals the depth of friendship for him in the ranks. These "Ats" show a hero's life.

SIX THINGS THAT NEED FIXING This is defined as the list of a hero's minor character flaws, enemies and rivals that bully her, and a wish list that—if we like the hero enough, and think she deserves help—get "fixed" later in the film. The writer should go back and forth between Act One (set-up) and Act Two or Three (pay-off), adding things to the list as you write. We as an audience like to see the Six Things That Need Fixing get paid off—the more the merrier. But you have to put the flaws in there in the beginning to make the pay-offs work.

STASIS = DEATH What's worse than going nowhere in life? Not much, and when we meet the hero during the Set-Up, this is where we find him. He's stuck in his current predicament, just "existing," but not truly living. If he doesn't do something, it's going to mean "death" for him, in some form or another. Luckily, there's a Catalyst just around the corner to jumpstart his journey.

BEAT 4: CATALYST An event that propels the story forward. It breaks the status quo, sending the hero's life in a new direction. It will force the hero out of her comfort zone, forcing her to choose between two equally undesirable options.

BEAT 5: DEBATE The character must react to the events of the Catalyst, and this can be shown at home, at work, and at play. A time of questioning, it requires the hero to confront his assumptions about the world as he knows it.

BEAT 6: BREAK INTO TWO A decisive moment in the hero's journey; she steps into the *upside-down Antithesis World* of Act Two as she seeks her tangible goal.

UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD Once your hero enters Act Two, he steps into an upside-down version of life as he knew it. It's a mirror reflection of Act One, an *antithesis*. Things might be the opposite of before, but his problems still follow him. The hero is forced to confront new challenges head-on and to grow.

BEAT 7: B STORY A "helper" story, the B Story is a subplot that focuses on a relationship the hero has. It might be with a mentor, love interest, family member, pet, or even a villain. It is through the B Story that the hero will come to understand the thematic premise.

BEAT 8: FUN AND GAMES The *promise of the premise* gives the audience what they came to the cinema for. These are the "trailer moments" of our story, and they allow the hero to face new challenges in the *upside-down world* of new experiences.

PROMISE OF THE PREMISE The premise of a movie, its "What is it?", can only be proven to be satisfying when we see it in action. What is fun, catchy, or hooks our interest about a movie's poster must be paid off once we get inside the theater. If it is not paid off, we the audience will feel cheated. The promise of the premise are those scenes or scene sequences that exploit the premise to its maximum and are usually found in the Fun and Games section of your screenplay. This is the point where we understand fully what this movie is about. This is why we bought our tickets.

BEAT 9: MIDPOINT The halfway point of the story, it is a moment where *A and B Stories cross*, often resulting in as a *false victory* or *false defeat* for the hero. The *stakes are raised*, and *time clocks* begin ticking. The hero's focus begins to shift from what he *wants* to what he *needs*.

MIDPOINT PARTY / PUBLIC COMING OUT FALSE VICTORY / FALSE DEFEAT

When the hero has a false victory at the Midpoint, he "gets everything he thinks he wants." Sometimes, this manifests itself in the form of a celebration, while at other times, it's a public coming out as the hero declares a new identity or a new way of living. Sometimes the hero has a false defeat where he "loses everything he thinks he wants." This, too, has a public aspect, as the hero's failure is often on display for others to see.

STAKES ARE RAISED This is a term that is frequently heard in development meetings. Also known as the *ticking clock* or the *Midpoint bump*, it means the raising of the level of tension. Suddenly from out of nowhere at the Midpoint, some new thing—an even bigger and more unexpected thing than we've seen before, and one that seems insurmountable—becomes a problem for our hero. You must be sure the stakes are raised at the Midpoint to give the hero new challenges and lead him to his ultimate win.

TIME CLOCK The time clock or ticking clock often occurs at the Midpoint as a way to let us know how much longer we've got—and to put pressure on the hero to triumph before it's too late.

BEAT 10: BAD GUYS CLOSE IN Although the hero had a brief moment of respite in the Midpoint, the forces of evil regroup, manifesting as both *internal* and *external bad guys*.

EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL These are the twin skeins of action found in the Bad Guys Close In section in which both external and internal pressure is applied to make our hero change—exactly what she is resisting! Having a sense of oncoming "death" in the All Is Lost moment, heroes resist both the external and internal, but cannot do so for long.

BEAT 11: ALL IS LOST The ultimate low point for the hero; it would have been better had he never started on the journey in the first place. Things can't get worse, and the *whiff of death* is present.

WHIFF OF DEATH The added extra bonus found in the All Is Lost beat of a well-structured screenplay is that very special moment where something dies—actually or metaphorically. The All Is Lost point is rife with the whiff of death because it marks the end of the world as it is and the beginning of a new world the hero will create from this seeming end.

BEAT 12: DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL The hero is beaten and she knows it. In this beat, she reacts to the events of the All Is Lost beat, searching deep within to finally come to terms with the theme. Usually, characters from the B Story play a part in helping the hero to realize what she truly needed all along.

MOMENT OF CLARITY, THE Every hero has a period of collapse around All Is Lost. Boom. He's done. And in Dark Night of the Soul, since we've got his attention and he has nowhere else to go anyway, this is the moment where the "penny drops" and he says: "I get it!" This beat reveals all the hero's flaws in his own eyes, and though it looks like he will never get a chance to capitalize on this... we know better, don't we?

BEAT 13: BREAK INTO THREE Using what she knew in his *Thesis World* combined with what she has learned in the *Antithesis World*, the hero steps into her *Synthesis World*, approaching the story problem in a new way. Having learned the lesson, she knows what she must do. This beat is a decisive moment for the hero.

BEAT 14: FINALE The climax of the story, the Finale is the hero's attempt to vanquish evil, fix the problem raised in the Catalyst, and demonstrate that he has changed. We often structure the Finale by using the **Five-Step Finale**, which we call *Storming the Castle*. First, the hero *Gathers the Team*, collecting allies who will help him. Next, he *Executes the Plan*. A *High Tower Surprise* awaits him in the third step, forcing him to reevaluate his approach. It causes him to *Dig, Deep Down*, proving once more that he has undoubtedly learned the theme that he needed to. Now, with proof of his transformation, he is ready for *The Execution of the New Plan*, ending the struggle.

BEAT 15: FINAL IMAGE The symbolic opposite of the Opening Image, the Final Image is a visual demonstration of the hero's transformation. It is the last thing the audience sees and should leave them with proof of change.