

SAVE THE CAT![®] GOES TO THE INDIES

The Screenwriters Guide to 50 Films from the Masters



SAMPLE BEAT SHEET
THE BIG LEBOWSKI

THE BIG LEBOWSKI (1998)

If one thing defines cult movies, it's the lack of appreciation that critics, press or audiences (sometimes one, sometimes all) show when they are first released. But time and an ever-growing fandom put such films in their place, making them not only ultimately successful, but — in this case — inducting them into the National Film Registry, inspiring themed festivals... and even a religion!

The Big Lebowski is perhaps the quintessential Coen brothers film along with another Whydunit, *Fargo* (beat out by Blake in *Save the Cat!® Goes to the Movies*). In this case, and despite its luminous colors, upbeat music, bathrobes and bowling uniforms, we are talking "Film Noir Whydunit."

How so? Start with the fact that the Coen brothers reportedly took inspiration from the work of Raymond Chandler (*The Big Sleep*, anyone?), including the complicated plot, double-crossing characters and the many secrets that need to be solved by our detective. Add to this the take-off tropes like the alcoholic detective, the *femme fatale* redhead, the powerful tycoon, the stray dangerous blonde...

Translate this to our *Cat!* vocabulary, and you'll have our "detective" who in his dudeness is quite unprepared for what he will find, a "secret" seemingly unimportant (who micturated upon a rug that clearly "tied the room together") — and don't forget the "dark turn" that will get him more involved than he ever wanted, setting himself up as part of the crime. Join us as we enter into a "world of pain," and let's go for this beat sheet!

W Type: Film Noir Whydunit

W Cousins: *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, *Brick*, *The Samurai (Le Samourai)*, *The American Friend*, *Blue Velvet*

THE BIG LEBOWSKI

Written by Ethan Coen & Joel Coen

Directed by Joel Coen

Opening Image: Let us follow a tumbleweed through the city of Los Angeles and meet Jeffrey Lebowski, AKA the Dude (Jeff Bridges): slacker, deadbeat and lover of White Russians. What will have changed in him by the end?

Set-Up: After paying with a post-dated 69-cent check for a carton of milk for his cocktails, the Dude returns home, only to be assaulted by a couple of thugs claiming that he owes money to a certain Jackie Treehorn. As a warning, one of them urinates on his rug, but after all, it seems like a misunderstanding. However, the Dude is desolated for having lost such a rug and visits another Lebowski, the “Big” one himself (David Huddleston) to seek compensation, for he is the millionaire achiever whose young wife Bunny is the one who indeed owes money to Treehorn. Lebowski demeans the Dude for his lifestyle (a running theme, as we’ll see), and dismisses him.

Theme Stated: “Ever thus to deadbeats, Lebowski,” says one of the thugs who assault and berate him in his home. A variation of the classic Latin quote, “Ever thus to tyrants,” this is our ironic theme, as most of the characters in the movie act similarly to the Dude. From the false millionaire, to the scheming Germans or to Maude (who wants a son without commitment), all are like the Dude — they want to achieve something... for nothing in return.

Catalyst: Before exiting the Big Lebowski’s mansion, the Dude sets the theme and the movie in motion by stealing a rug and meeting Bunny (Tara Reid), the Big’s nymphomaniac wife.

Debate: Will there be consequences for the theft of the rug? Will Lebowski suffer any consequences? He seems to be very much at ease. In the meantime, we get to know his buddies better, gun-toting violent defender of all things Jewish, Walter Sobchak (John Goodman),

and silent Donny (Steve Buscemi). There is a *double bump* when the Big Lebowski calls to meet the Dude, furthering our Debate section when he offers the Dude what appears to be an easy job: Bunny has been kidnapped and the Dude must deliver \$1 million. Who has kidnapped her? This is the “secret” that will have to be unveiled.

Break into Two: Lying at home on his new rug, the Dude is assaulted again, this time by different people, including a *femme fatale* redhead, Maude (Julianne Moore). Lebowski is way more involved than he thought, and there is no turning back now. The film’s first dream sequence signals the act change.

B Story: The love story pertains to Maude and the Dude. It’s not a traditional love story by any means, but fits well in the noir tradition, as we will see that she is using him in various ways.

Fun and Games: After the dream sequence, the Dude has to fulfill the *promise of the premise* by carrying out the delivery of the money. Unfortunately, he asks Walter, who has a plan of his own to keep the million for themselves, to come along — and he leaves the kidnapers a “ringer” full of dirty underwear instead. Upon returning to the bowling alley, the Dude thinks that Bunny will be killed, but Walter believes that she has, in fact, “kidnapped herself” to keep the money. Then there’s a new problem: the money is stolen along with the Dude’s car. He gets a call — the woman who stole his rug wants to see him.

Midpoint: *A and B Stories cross* when his Dudeness officially meets Maude, daughter of the Big Lebowski and an avant-garde artist and feminist who also wants the money back, since her father took it from the family foundation. In a spoken *Sex at 60*-brimmed scene, they discuss the enjoyment of coitus, and Maude reveals that Bunny is actually a porn actress who probably wants to scam her father. Maude *raises the stakes* by offering the Dude 10% of the money when he recovers it, then gives him a doctor’s number. El Duderino

celebrates a *false victory* in the limo, stating that he “can’t be worried about that sh*t.”

Bad Guys Close In: Seconds later, he notices the Bad Guys Close In when he sees a VW Beetle following him. He is taken to another limo, where the Big Lebowski shows him a severed toe and threatens him should he not recover the money; we witness the “dark turn” of the Dude as he lies to the Big that they dropped the money. Other Bad Guys, a bunch of vinyl-dressed Germans, assault the Dude at home and request the money or they will cut his “chonson.” The Dude “abides” and finds his car, along with a lead that takes him to the 15-year old who supposedly stole the car and the money. Things don’t end well, and the Dude is assaulted at home again, this time taken to see Jackie Treehorn himself, the one who wants to find Bunny to collect a debt. “All the Dude wanted was his rug back,” the Dude says before passing out, drugged by something Jackie put in his “Caucasian.”

All Is Lost: “Darkness washed over the Dude” as he dreams again, a seemingly pleasant bowling-themed dream that turns into a johnson-cutting nightmare. He wakes up and is hit again, now by policemen. No leads, no money, no help... *No nada!* What can he do now?

Dark Night of the Soul: A weary Dude sadly returns home, but he is so angry that he says he hates the Eagles and is kicked out of the cab. But wait: wasn’t that Bunny passing by in a convertible, with all her toes intact?

Break into Three: The Dude gets back home to find it has been trashed. Luckily, *A and B Stories cross* and he finds Maude there, so at least he can have sex with her! But he soon finds that she only intends to get pregnant. Before almost collapsing, the Dude has a revelation: Maude explains that her father has no money (it was all her mom’s), so the kidnapping may have been a way for him to steal from his own foundation.

Finale:

1. **Gathering the Team:** The Dude “gathers his team,” basically consisting solely of Walter, who complains it is Shabbos and he shouldn’t be driving.
2. **Executing the Plan:** They both confront the Big Lebowski and confirm their theories. He demands his money, and the Dude and Walter finally leave the house penniless. At last, the “secret” has been unveiled!
3. **High Tower Surprise:** Unexpectedly, at the bowling alley, the Germans, who don’t know that the plan has been uncovered, ask for the money, and a confrontation takes place. In the aftermath, Donnie dies of a heart attack.
4. **Dig, Deep Down:** The Dude and Walter “dig, deep down” to say goodbye to their dear friend, while the Dude has to “dig” a little more to remain friends with Walter when he inadvertently dusts him with Donnie’s ashes.
5. **The Execution of the New Plan:** Their “new plan” is to go on like nothing happened and to live a tranquil life of bowling and drinking — that is, “abiding.”

Final Image: The Stranger bookends the film by finishing his monologue. Has the Dude or Los Angeles changed by the revelation of this adventure? Most likely not, but there is something comforting in that nothing will change in his Dudeness’s realm.