

STORY FUNDAMENTALS

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF
WHEN EDITING YOUR OWN WORK

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Introduction

The 6 Questions:

1. Whose story/scene is this?
2. What's the action here?
3. What's the reader really hoping will happen here?
4. What's the value? What's the change?
5. Where is the locus of conflict?
6. What's the prize and the price?

On Premise

On Denouement

Resources and Back Matter

Introduction

Back in the 'nineties, I embarked on a postgraduate diploma that included a semester of screenwriting. I'd spent a colossal amount of time watching *Star Trek* and *Twin Peaks* as an undergraduate, so it sounded like a good distraction.

But I was pretty uninvested.

You see, I'd come straight out of university where I'd studied English literature and I believed Virginia Woolf was the captain of 'good writing' ... and Jane Austen her 2-IC.

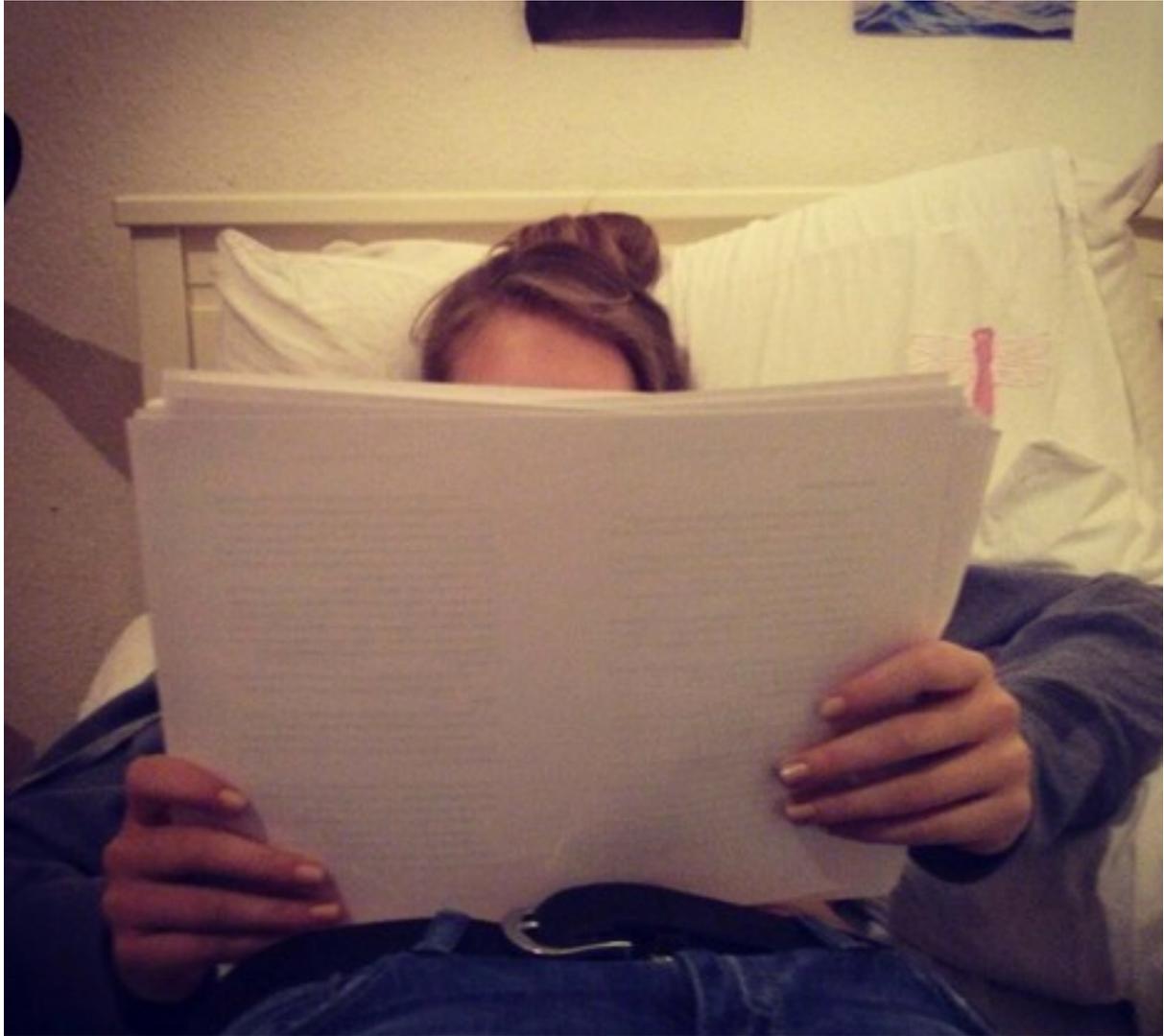
What good would it do me to study scriptwriting? I wrote *literary fiction*. Everything else was ... well, pulp. Wasn't it?

My screenwriting teacher turned out to be one of Australia's top TV writers, and she'd read more novels – crime, YA, kid-lit, sci-fi, speculative and, yes, *literary* – than anybody I'd ever met. One of the things she taught me was that **a writer doesn't have to stick to a formula**, but – especially when it comes to plot – it's useful to be able to step back and take a critical look at your own work. That's why, regardless of your preferred form or genre – Woolf or Dickens, Rowling or King, blogging or tweeting – **understanding the art of story is invaluable**.

... plot is an accurate term that names the internally consistent, interrelated patterns of events that move through time to shape and design a story.

—Robert McKee, *STORY*

This PDF contains a few of the crucial questions I ask myself when I'm editing my own fiction writing. They can be applied equally to any 'unit' of a story: a whole manuscript, a chapter, or a scene.



Ms14 reads a first draft

1. Whose story/scene is this?

This is a classic Robert McKee (screenwriting guru) question, and it applies to fiction. I ask this question because when a reader approaches a work, they like to know where they're positioned, who they're investing in, and who they're travelling alongside for the next X number of pages.

It's an especially good question to ask when you're drilling into dialogue, because it can be easy to get wrapped up in the argument or the discussion between your characters ... and lose focus on whose story we're telling, and from whose point of view.

When assessing scenes: the protagonist is not passive, so they will be driving the scene, but that doesn't mean we have their point of view all the time. As the writer, we just need to know who's telling that particular part of the story, and why they are the one telling it.

Remember, different genres also have different expectations when it comes to point-of-view, so it pays to know your genre and know what you can realistically get away with in terms of head-jumping (switching POV).

2. What's the *action* here?

This question helps us distinguish between the worlds of **ACTION** (or **PLOT**) and **IDEAS** (and **THEMES**).

For anyone starting out writing, this is a great place to start learning how to view your work objectively. You should be able to say in one sentence what your story's PLOT is.

ACTION or **IDEA?**

Example 1 (STAR WARS, Episode 4)

PLOT: Because his home and family are destroyed by the Empire, Luke Skywalker joins the Rebels and saves the universe.

In this example it's:

Because of [Event], [Person] does [Action].

Note there's no mention of longing, dissatisfaction, sadness.

Those are **emotions**, which drive **actions**.

THEMES: coming-of-age, good vs. evil; 'the force' vs. 'man'-made technology. Themes and ideas, like emotions, can't be 'seen' until put into action, and they're often able to be expressed as binaries or short phrases.

Example 2 (Scene from **TO THE LIGHTHOUSE**, Virginia Woolf)

PLOT: Mrs Ramsay walks across the room.

THEME: Ideal vs. real; marriage as institution vs. flawed relationship. (i.e. the stuff we can't 'see' that's going on in her head).

3. What is my reader *really* hoping will happen here?

Even if you write to break from tradition or genre, it's still useful to think of your reader as a human being ... and intelligent, at that. So I ask this question for a couple of reasons.

Firstly, it helps separate the story threads, and work out which are currently the most compelling ... and which might need some work.

How does it do this?

Every character has their GOALS (the basic ACTION that's required to get from A to B), but every character should also have their NEEDS. These are in the realm of the unseen.

Once a reader picks up on a character's NEEDS, those needs often sit there, at the back of the reader's mind, throughout the reading. If the writer raises the issue of an unmet need ... but then drops it in favour of plying the story with ACTION and PLOT ... well, the reader experiences an unresolvedness, and they may walk away dissatisfied – even if it's just an exchange of dialogue.

Secondly, it's often the universal ideas that keep us reading ... regardless of whether the storyworld is

comprehensive enough to be made into a Lego series (LORD OF THE RINGS, HARRY POTTER) or the plot is intricately woven (KRYPTONOMICON, AND THEN THERE WERE NONE) or designed for cerebral gymnastics (IQ80, FINNEGAN'S WAKE).

Not everyone can relate to day-to-day life in Panem (THE HUNGER GAMES) but we can all relate to (or empathise with) fear, courage, oppression ...

So this question can help us clarify the global themes that might be driving the story.

Example 1: CHARLOTTE AIMES (Young Adult)

When I was writing my first YA, my then 14-year old daughter read an early draft over a couple of days. By the next draft, I'd broken up a friendship and amped up the unrequited romance thread ... and all of a sudden she was up half the night with the torch. She read the entire manuscript in one sitting.

The plot was still exciting, but **her hope that the personal relationships would resolve was the ultimate driver**. Which is appropriate *and expected* for a YA book.

Example 2: STAR WARS Episode 4 (Sci-fi)

A reader could be *thinking*: 'Luke might save the universe!'. But they're probably *hoping* the goodies win. They might also be hoping Luke and Leia sort out the tension, but the weighting of that emotional story thread is lower than the 'I hope the goodies win' thread. As it should be for a sci-fi.

Remember: part of the writer's job is to know what's appropriate for – and, in almost all cases, *expected by* – their target reader.

Many writers balk at this idea, but it's comes down to simple respect for the reader.

There are a few key scenes that all 'genres' have. For example, in Crime, we need to see The Body. In Horror, we expect not only The Body, but an Antagonist whose dastardly evilness far outweighs the relative goodness of the Protagonist. Thrillers tend to borrow from Crime and Horror these days, so we'd expect a few Red Herrings, as well as a Chase Scene, and perhaps even the introduction of a Ticking Clock, just to up the ante (which is borrowed from the Action genre).

4. What's the value? Has something changed?

Okay, that's two questions, but they're related ...

Has there been a change of some sort in between page 1 and page 200? Between the opening of the scene and the end of the scene?

This is what's called analysing the VALUE of a scene, and it relates to the change in progression of the protagonist's story arc (where are they trying to go?), and their emotional journey. You can go through and put a + or a - at the beginning and end of your scenes, to get an idea of the progression. (NB. If you use Scrivener, you can add +/- in the 'Synopsis' field of your chapter/scene, and it will be easy to see the value progression when you view your whole Manuscript in 'Group Mode'.)

Example 1: STAR WARS Episode 4

At the beginning of the story, Luke wants 'Freedom': freedom from adolescence, freedom from the confines of his home planet. At the beginning, the value of 'Freedom' is a big fat negative. At the end, it's positive.

Example 2: A very short scene from THE ROAD,

Cormac McCarthy (p.51, Plcador 2006 edition)

In the previous scene (of seven lines), the boy and the man have discovered footprints in the tarmac, and are surprised to see another man ahead of them on the road. The next scene therefore opens with a value of 'Hope'. In less than a page, the plot has moved forwards, and we learn that 'nothing can be done' for the man, whom they realise is injured, and shuffling very slowly. Hope once more fades. (THE ROAD is 300+ pages of shifting scene-value mastery.)

5. Where is the locus of the conflict?

What does your character want more than anything in the world? And what's getting in the way?

Usually, an obstacle, or source of conflict, falls into three arenas:

- EXTERNAL
- INTERPERSONAL
- INTERNAL

In other words, it could be:

- an environment (e.g. a post-apocalyptic world), a political regime
- another character (antagonist) who desires a *contrary* or *contradictory* outcome
- or it can come from within the protagonist themselves (their own fears and negative mental states, illness, etc.)

When a scene isn't working, it can be useful to work out what the conflict is and why it's there.

Think about it in terms of opposing forces, both wanting

different things. By the end of the scene, one of them should have made headway.

A character's fears and desires will propel the story forwards. But if there are no real obstacles, we can't truly learn anything revealing about the character, and they can't make choices.

*Choices made
when nothing is at
risk mean little.*

—Robert McKee,
STORY

In this comic (below), you'll see one character has one desire, and the other has a different one. (Often the case with toddlers and parents.)

The comic strip works, though, despite neither of them reaching their desired goals, because it's a reflection of life as a young mother, and the reader will recognise this ... and recognise that when external goals can't be reached, maybe there's an internal shift that needs to happen ... another way to look at it (with humour).

NB The story probably wouldn't work if it wasn't a comic strip, because comic strip reader expectations are just right for the bite-sized 'learning' that comes from a short snippet like this.



6. What's the prize? And the price?

Another double-barrell ...

For every win, there must be loss.

In terms of character growth, a character must give something up in order to have a shift in attitude or learning. And it should be related to their motivating force.

Example 1: HARRY POTTER series [spoiler alert]

Harry eventually wins his fight against the ultimate evil of Voldemort, but he pays a hefty price on the critical three fronts:

- INTERNAL (loss of innocence, he's become a 'harder' person)
- INTERPERSONAL (the loss of many loved ones, including Dumbledore, Sirius Black, and one of the beloved Weasley Twins)
- EXTERNAL (Hogwarts itself is destroyed, and the future of wizard education and other governing bodies and infrastructures etc. have unravelled).

If the losses weren't felt by us, the reader, the story would be much less powerful. And they're felt by us because from the

outset, Harry is pitched as a child growing up, searching for belonging and for justice. These quests are answered in his wins ... and his losses.

Example 2: PRIDE AND PREJUDICE, Jane Austen

Elizabeth Bennet desires a marriage match based on love and mutual respect for her suitor's upstanding moral values (if she is to marry at all) ... *not* based on practicality alone. When she does indeed achieve a match, it has been at the cost of precisely her pride and her beliefs about her own moral standing (she was prejudiced and self-righteous). Her prejudices and stubbornness also resulted in numerous confusions, and partially contributed to the undoing of her younger sister Kitty's reputation.

A few notes about Premise

There's a spot of contention about the definition of PREMISE, though most will agree every story needs to have clarity in the form being distilled into an idea, a phrase or a sentence.

Here are **three common definitions**, and my advice would be to call them what you like – **inspiration, Log-line, Central Dramatic Question, Controlling Idea** – but be ready to answer all of them. One is about keeping the writer going ... and the other two are about keeping the story focused.

*The more beautifully you shape
your work around one clear idea,
the more meanings audiences
will discover ... as they take your
idea and follow its implications
into every aspect of their lives ...*

—Robert McKee, STORY

DEFINITION 1

The idea that keeps the writer inspired to keep writing: it's personal, and it could be anything from an open-ended 'what if?' question to a photograph of a place that evokes something for the writer. It could be the post-it note we stick to the

computer screen to remind us why we're writing this story ... specifics To Be Decided. (Of course, I'm using creative license in the examples below, as I have no way of knowing what the writer was really thinking.)

Example 1: What if there was a way for kids to visit magical faraway lands, but still be home in time for tea? (THE MAGIC FARAWAY TREE, Enid Blyton)

Example 2: What if a contemporary teenager fell in love with a vampire? (TWILIGHT, Stephenie Meyer)

Example 3: I'll take hokey religions and ancient weapons over a good blaster any day, thanks. (STAR WARS, Ep.4)

DEFINITION 2

This is the larger, thematic concept, often expressed as a VALUE with a CAUSE. Like an adage or a saying. (McKee calls this the 'Controlling Idea' and he says it must be related to the story's climactic scene.)

Example 1: Justice may not always prevail, but it's a better outcome when we view others with respect (TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD, Harper Lee)

Example 2: There's hope for humanity as long as there's love (THE ROAD, Cormac McCarthy)

DEFINITION 3

This is much more specific to the story details, but it's not just plot. It's where ACTION meets IDEAS. Some call it a Log-Line. Some call it a Pitch.

It's often reduce-able to a character with a desire, who faces a complication in their quest. If it contains irony ... all the better.

Remembering, of course, that in stories, A leads to B leads to C ... and so-on. 'Because of X, Y happens. Because of Y, Z happens.' Everything should have a knock-on effect.

When [INCITING INCIDENT OCCURS], a [SPECIFIC PROTAGONIST] must [OBJECTIVE], or else [STAKES].

Example 1: When restless teenager Tris [SPECIFIC PROTAGONIST] discovers she is Divergent – unable to be classified in one social faction – [INCITING INCIDENT] she leaves her family's faction, Abnegation, to join Dauntless, where she soon discovers she must pass initiation [OBJECTIVE] or be outcast [STAKES] ... and keep her true Divergent status a secret [OBJECTIVE] or be eliminated by corrupt political powers [STAKES].

Example 2: When Christopher – a highly gifted but socially challenged teenager – discovers his neighbour's dead poodle in the front yard, his need for order and logic compels him to try and make sense of this seemingly random, horrific event ... but, in doing so, he not only puts himself in the frame, but discovers his father has been lying about his mother's whereabouts ... an unquantifiable complication that threatens to throw his life into chaos.

On denouement

I like to think of a denouement as **recovery time**. It's where we, as a reader, have time to breathe, to absorb the journey we've just travelled ... and think about its implications.

A denouement also brings explanation ... but not necessarily resolution.

It's often referred to as 'the return home', where balance is restored to the universe (albeit at a cost). **It is as much about tone as plot**, and can prompt us to think and to reflect without moralising. (Unless you're Enid Blyton. But she's her own special genre.)

It pays to take denouement seriously, because it's the stage of the story in which we will by now know that **ACTIONS** have been taken, and that there has been resolution in the **PLOT** ... but our reader may need time and clarification to process the **INTERNAL** journey of our Protagonist.

In other words, we don't spell out what's happened exactly, in the **EXTERNAL**, but we sit with the implications for our character's internal journey: their losses, their gains.

References

Here's a list of what I'd call my 'go-to' reference texts that always give me insight when I'm trying to untangle my **big-picture, plot challenges**:

THE STORY GRID by Shawn Coyne (also online at thestorygrid.com)

STORY by Robert McKee (screenwriter)

THE ART OF DRAMATIC WRITING by Lajos Egri (playwright)

READY, SET, NOVEL, which is [NaNoWriMo](#)'s collaborative publication

SAVE THE CAT by Blake Snyder (screenwriter)

NAIL YOUR NOVEL by Roz Morris

And finally ...

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