

MANNS/MACKIE STUDIOS

WRITING A CHRISTIAN SCREENPLAY FOR PRODUCTION

TY MANNS
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER | WRITER | DIRECTOR

A QUESTION OF FAITH | MY BROTHER'S KEEPER | REDEEMED

Writing a Christian Screenplay for Production

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The Three Act Structure

The three act structure has been around since cavemen first sat around campfires and told stories to each other



Do not get carried away! **Keep page count between 95-108 pages.** The closer you are to **95 pages**, the better!

The general rule is **one-page of a screenplay equals one-minutes on screen.**

Don't waste paper space -

- Write only what your audience can see on screen.
- Get into your story quickly.
- Pacing/Tempo - CRITICAL!

Four Questions You Should Ask Before You Write Your First Letter

The majority of failed screenplays can be traced to one common mistake - - **A Weak Central Idea.**

Your “**Central Idea**” is the **road map of your work**! It’s the “bread crumbs” that help guide your characters! It’s the mortar that connects your acts and your plots. Without a “**Strong Central Idea**” your story **may be doomed** from the very first letter you type!

There are **four questions, so simple** that after I share them with you - **You will kick yourself** (or the person beside you) for not using them in your past screenplays -

1. Who is your MAIN CHARACTER?
2. What is your MAIN CHARACTER trying to accomplish?
3. Who is trying to stop your MAIN CHARACTER?
4. What happens if your MAIN CHARACTER fails?

The answer to question #4 must be the absolute worst outcome that can happen! RAISE THE STAKES!

Four Question Examples

MOVIE TITLE	Question #1 Who is your MAIN CHARACTER?	Question #2 What is your MAIN CHARACTER trying to accomplish?	Question #3 Who is trying to stop your MAIN CHARACTER?	Question #4 What happens if your MAIN CHARACTER fails?
The Avengers "Infinity Wars"	Iron Man (and the Avengers)	Prevent Thanos from collecting the six Infinity Stones	Thanos	Half the Universe dies
Mission Impossible "Fallout"	Ethan Hunt	Prevent simultaneous nuclear attacks	Solomon Lane	Ethan's Ex-Wife dies
Collateral	Max	Prevent a merciless hitman from accomplishing his one-night mission	Vincent	Annie (Jada Pinkett-Smith) dies

Include a "Stakes Character": Your screenplay should include a **"Stakes Character"** that motivates your Protagonist to win at all cost, **even his/her life**.

The death the character faces should be, whenever possible, real physical death. If real death can't be played out in your story (because you're writing a love story, or because you're doing a dramatic feature) **then you have to use a figurative death**, but it's got to be a type of **figurative death that is so strong, it might as well be real death**.

Four Questions – Dramatic Central Question

The simplest of all questions to answer is #4, because there can be only one answer: death. Not discomfort. Not indigestion. Not buying a new car... **Death.**

The life or death of your main character are the only stakes that you know for sure people will care about, because **if you get the answer to Question #4 right,** and you follow the four Archetypes, you will have -

1. A sympathetic main character, who has probably...
2. Suffered some sort of undeserved misfortune, and...
3. Who is engaged in a compelling goal, against...
4. A ruthlessly committed opponent.

Question #4 provides the key “ask” about your screenplay, Your Central Dramatic Question...”
“What is your story about?”

A good general rule is that **the Central Dramatic Question should be introduced as early as possible**, best when in the opening and at the latest the end of Act One (page 28-32 in the screenplay).

Character Development/Arcs – Four Important Archetypes

Every screenplay you write, you must move the main character through four key archetypes from opening moment to final fade. And not only does the main character move through these four archetypes, he/she must **do so like clockwork!**

A very common note given to screenwriters is **“too plot-driven rather than character-driven.”** This is an executive’s polite way of saying **“This script stinks!** The things that happened to your characters came from you being clever, not from the wants, needs or desires of your characters! **LET YOUR CHARACTERS DRIVE YOUR WRITING!**

Your job as a writer is to impress the reader/Executive Producer(s) by characters, rather than express your story through the plot.

Understanding how your main character moves through these four archetypes during the course of your story will get you within spitting distance of a character-driven script.

And by **adding depth to your characters through theme and subtext** after you’ve developed around the four archetypes, **your characters will grow fuller and take on a grander life.**

Character Development/Arcs – Four Important Archetypes

The four archetypes are: **Orphan, Wanderer, Warrior, Martyr.**

Orphan: At the start of most films, **the main character is already an orphan or is about to become one.** Sometimes a real orphan; sometimes a figurative one.

Luke Skywalker is really an orphan, as is Peter Parker. Forrest Gump's father is long gone, and he is an outcast because of his low I.Q.. **Woody** becomes orphaned from his social group after the arrival of Buzz Lightyear.

Sometimes the main character chooses to be an orphan by distancing himself from family and love because of duty, iconoclasm, selfishness, or emotional reserve.

Jack Dawson (Titanic) roams wherever, settling down nowhere for too long; **Dr. Alan Grant (Jurassic Park)** places himself out in the middle of deserts to dig dinosaurs. Dr. Grant is emotionally detached from people in general and kids in particular. **Jack Reacher (Reacher) is a loner,** never settling down in one place, hates working with partners. **Robert McCall (The Equalizer) is a widower,** he lives in isolation, never making connections with individuals or the world around him.

Character Development/Arcs – Four Important Archetypes

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Wanderer: At the start of the first half of Act 2, and **your hero has become or has to become a wanderer in order to answer the Central Question.** He goes hither and yon **looking for clues, meeting helpers, running into opponents, overcoming obstacles. It's the learning phase** where he picks up the skills and tools he thinks he needs to answer the Central Question.

Luke goes finds Obie One, meets Han Solo, gets to Han's ship, practices the force, discovers through R2D2 that Princess Leia is being held in a detention cell. Frees Princess Leia, joins the Rebels. Jack Reacher meets the Prosecutor, a supply store worker, locates the shooting range, forms an alliance with the range owner...

In every situation, in every film the main character finds/picks up the knowledge and resources needed to get to a successful end to the Central Dramatic Question and leads him/her to becoming a...

Character Development/Arcs – Four Important Archetypes

The four archetypes are: **Orphan, Wanderer, Warrior, Martyr.**

Warrior: At the mid-point of your screenplay, page 55 or so, the geographic center of Act 2, your hero has acquired most of the helpers and all of the skills and items he needs in order to resolve the Central Dramatic Question. Or maybe time is just running out. Either way, it's now time to act. **It is time to become a Warrior.**

Luke actively fights to get to the Princess and save her (Star Wars). **Brody goes out on the boat to fight and kill the shark** (Jaws). Jack Dawson and Rose are in love but must now fight to get away from Cal and off the Titanic which just struck an iceberg (Titanic).

Here, in this awful place, **the hero "dies" and is reborn into a new hero**; the **one who understands how to resolve the Central Dramatic Question once and for all.**

Fight, fight, fight! One step forward, two steps back. Things are looking up. Things are looking down.

Character Development/Arcs – Four Important Archetypes

The four archetypes are: **Orphan, Wanderer, Warrior, Martyr.**

Martyr: The hero started the film alone, as an orphan. A crisis arose throwing his world out of whack, and he left or was forced out of his orphan status and began to wander in order to learn what was needed to answer the Central Question.

Around the mid-point of the story he became a warrior and fought with all his might and cunning in order to answer the Central Question, even to the point of his near-death or the near-death of someone close to him. And still it wasn't enough. The Central Question remained unanswered.

What action is missing for our hero to take? What more could he possibly do?

Sacrifice him/herself.

Our hero must be willing to die and not be reborn in order to answer the Central Question. He must be willing to be a martyr. Only by a willingness to lose it all can he win it all. Only by giving up what he thought he wanted can he be rewarded with what he needs.

Character Development/Arcs – Four Important Archetypes

The four archetypes are: **Orphan, Wanderer, Warrior, Martyr.**

Martyr: The secret of the martyr beat is that the hero is no longer motivated by the possibility of success. He/she is motivated solely by the desire to do what is right or what is necessary, regardless of the consequences.

Luke has to be willing to fly into the Death Star and shut off his targeting computer, showing that he truly believes in the force. Ripley, in ALIENS, has to be willing to venture into the alien nest in order to save Newt. Oscar Schindler, in SCHINDLER'S LIST, has to use the money he so desperately coveted in order to buy the lives of 1200 Jews. **Jack Reacher confronts his enemy with a knife.** Robert McCall goes to the store to confront an outnumbered enemy. **Dr. Strange turns over his Infinity Stone in order for the Avengers to eventually defeat Thanos.**

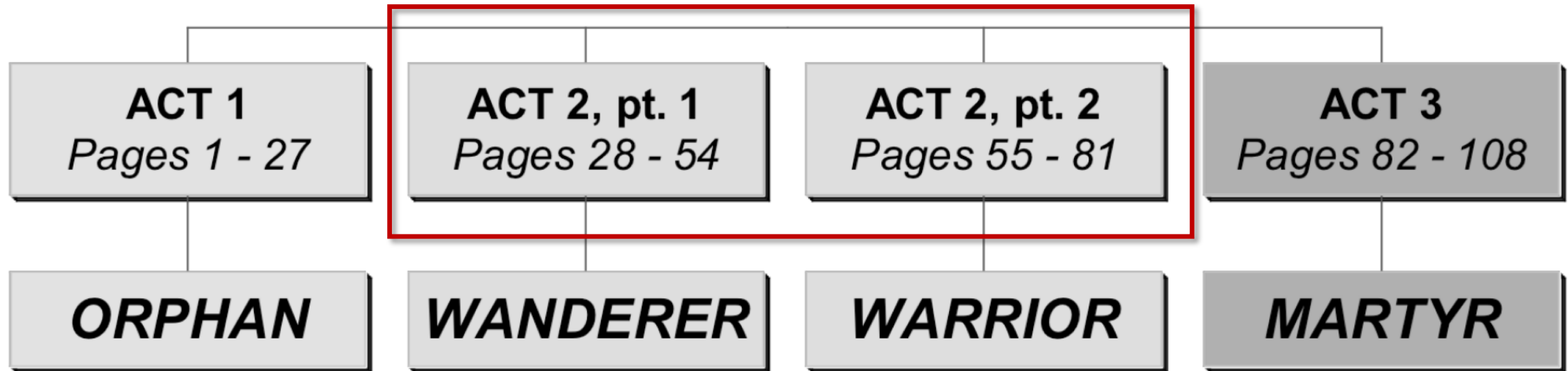
Orphan. Wanderer. Warrior. Martyr. It works in dramas (SCHINDLER'S LIST), it works in comedies (THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY), it works in action films (SAVING PRIVATE RYAN), it works in science fiction (STAR WARS), it works in thrillers (THE SIXTH SENSE), it works in animation (ALADDIN).

The formula always works: "When a TYPE OF PERSON has/does/wants/gets A, (**ORPAN**) he/she gets/does/tries/learns B, (**WANDERER**) only to discover that C (**WARRIOR**) now happens and he/she must respond by doing D (**MARTYR**).

Don't mess with it - It works!

Character Development/Arcs – Four Important Archetypes

Where does these Archetypes fit in your story?



Break Act 2 into two parts. In each part develop your character arcs... move your characters and your story in a way that your audience can easily follow and become a fans of your main character. **Your goal as a writer is to engage the audience in a way that makes them HATE your antagonist and ROOT for your main character!**

Pacing and tempo is critical. Read and re-read your screenplay. If the pacing and tempo isn't there... rewrite and rewrite!

Snatch the Rug From Underneath Your Audience At The End!

Your screenplay should be a series of “Yes” and “NO” questions, each moving your story to the next page, the next scene, the next act... **To the answer to your Central Dramatic Question!**

To perfectly help close out the action of your story, the last four plot questions/points, in order, are -

- 1. BIG YES**
- 2. NO**
- 3. BIG NO**
- 4. FINAL YES**

In other words
Take your audience to a point of your story where it looks like absolute success for your main character, then snatch the rug right from underneath him/her!

Snatch the Rug From Underneath Your Audience At The End!

The Central Dramatic Question is on the brink of being answered to the Negative

BIG YES: The main character has achieved a substantial victory. George McFly has defeated Biff in BACK TO THE FUTURE. Brody, Quint and Hooper are heading back to the shallows after being beaten up by the shark. Rose has finally made it onto a lifeboat and is being lowered towards the water in TITANIC. And then...

NO: The main character suffers a set back. In TITANIC, Rose jumps out of the lifeboat because she won't leave Jack behind. The boat in JAWS blows its engine. Marty tries to give Emmett a note about the future that will save his life (saving Emmett's life is one of Marty's goals) however Emmett rips the note up.

Snatch the Rug From Underneath Your Audience At The End!

BIG NO: Disaster. Failure. Situation hopeless, seemingly beyond remedy. The Titanic is breaking apart and Jack and Rose are being chased by a murderous Cal Hockley, they get away from him and now ride the Titanic down into the water. Marty finally makes it back to the future after much difficulty only to arrive a few moments too late to save Emmett. The shark has seemingly killed Hooper, has eaten Quint and has wrecked the boat which is sinking fast.

FINAL YES: Pulling success from the jaws of failure, the The main character achieves his/her main goal, although sometimes the goal can be quite different from what the Hero first set out to achieve.

In these cases, the main character gets what he/she really needs, rather than what he/she thought he/she wanted.

Snatch the Rug From Underneath Your Audience At The End!

STAR WARS Act Three - Martyr - 4 Plot Points

BIG YES

They destroy the Tie Fighters and get away. Get plans to rebel base. Will attack Death Star.

NO

They had a tracking beacon on them. The Deathstar is closing in on rebel base.

BIG NO

Massive dogfight. X-Wings are getting destroyed left and right. The Deathstar is too much for them. It comes down to Luke, who shuts off his targeting computer. Vader is going to kill him.

FINAL YES

Han swoops in, Luke uses the force, destroys the Death Star. The Princess is safe.

Finish your story with a short denouement scene to wrap up the story which shows the hero now fully actualized, returned to his Ordinary World, and both having embraced and embodying the positive values!

Do's and Don't s of writing a Christian screenplay

Some people argue that it is wrong to watch movies that have alcoholism, drug use, anger, cruelty, violence, or any other sin in them. But just because a movie incorporates sin into the storyline without painting it as wrong doesn't *necessarily* mean Christians can't watch it.

Do tell a story!

Do not write frivolously

Do write flawed characters

Do not write sex scenes/show unnecessary flesh

Do close all your story plot points

Do not write over-the-top violence into your story

Do write engaging dialogue

Do not write curse words into your story

Do include bible verses into your story

Do not be gratuitous with your bible verses (bible verses should fit your story and be a natural part of character dialogue)

Do write a story that involves sin, backsliding, loss of faith, disbelief of God, etc...

Do not write a story that glorifies or inclines one to sin

Do write a story about God's laws

Do not write a story intended as a statement against God's laws

Do explain/close out questionable scenes in your story

Don't write a story that you wouldn't watch with
Jesus sitting next to you and make sure that
GOD WINS
(his word, his message)
At the end of your story.

Time to Write, But Before You do...

Ask yourself the following questions -

- ☐ Have I answered (brilliantly) the Four Questions?
- ☐ Is my Protagonist sympathetic?
- ☐ Is my Protagonist goal compelling?
- ☐ Do I have a clear Central Question?
- ☐ Do the obstacles become increasingly difficult?
- ☐ Is the Antagonist ruthlessly committed?
- ☐ Are the stakes life or death?
- ☐ Have I given those stakes a human face via a Stakes Character?
- ☐ Have I used the Formula to see if my story can go the distance?
- ☐ Does my Protagonist move through the Four Archetypes?

Reference Material – Three Books You Should Own

- ❑ **Write Now, Right Now** (and then Write Again, Right Away!) by Jeffrey Alan Schechter
- ❑ **Save the Cat!** The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need Book by Blake Snyder
- ❑ **The Screenwriter's Bible** Book by David Trottier

Questions

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