Outlining a Screenplay

A phenomenal idea just struck the creative center of your brain, and you know that it will make an amazing movie. You must write the script for this masterpiece, but the question is how do you develop that fleeting concept into a well-structured screenplay? The temptation is to just plow ahead and begin writing, letting the story take you where ever it leads. The problem with that is that it’s easy to get off track. Sometimes the writer discovers nice surprises awaiting to be discovered as the characters seem to make up the story as they go; but usually, what you will end up with is a mess with no cohesive narrative and a lot of random, rambling threads that don’t add up to anything satisfactory. Before you attempt to tackle the daunting task of screenwriting, you need a good, solid outline. Like a screenplay is a blue print of a movie, an outline is the framework onto which you build your script. Does it have to be exact with no deviation? Of course not–use an outline as a tool, so if inspiration takes you in a new, exciting direction, your outline will be there to guide you back to the story that you want to tell. So how do you go about writing a solid outline?

Make notes

The mention of taking notes may send you spiraling into nightmarish flashbacks of high school or college where you had to scrawl down everything muttered by the instructor in case it shows up on a test. Do not let the term “notes” scare you away. These are simply your ideas recorded. Keep a notebook, index cards, or a voice recording device handy so that when an idea pops into your head, you can save it for later. All too often a perfect solution to a problem in your story will come to you at times when you are least ready (in the shower, while driving, as you’re falling asleep), and many times if you put off making a note of it, it will be forgotten. Notes do not have to be orderly or structured while you’re making them; that comes later when you have enough notes to start sorting through to see what ideas work and what do not. At this point, you can categorize them–character ticks, dialogue, scenes, major plot points, etc. Once you do this, the story idea begins to be fleshed out, though you still have no structure to it. That comes next.

Break the story into acts

The most basic structure of a screenplay is the three-act story–Act 1 is the beginning, Act 2 is the middle, and Act 3 is the end. When you begin to outline your screenplay, start off with this format. Take your notes and story ideas and organize all the various small pieces into where you think they might belong. For instance, knowing that Act 1 is where you introduce the main characters, you may want to place any notes you have for individual characters there. Let’s say that your protagonist bites his fingernails, is an excellent chess player, and has a sarcastic sense of humor. Each one of those character traits is on a separate note. Place those under the Act 1 header because you know that you’ll need a scene (or multiple scenes) that introduce each of these characteristics. You don’t want to wait until late in the story to discover something about your hero that might be useful–set it up at the beginning so it can be paid off later. Some ideas are critical to the plot and may have to take place in the middle or end of the story; determine where the most appropriate place for these elements are and list them accordingly. It is also a good idea to know how you want the story to begin (hopefully with a scene that grabs the audience so they will be interested in what comes next) and how it will end. Write these details down in Act 1 and Act 3, respectively.

Determine the turning points in the story

Turning points are the moments in the story where the plot heads off in a new direction. These need to be located at the end of Act 1, in the middle of Act 2, and at the end of Act 2. For instance, Act 1 is where you establish the characters, setting, and major conflict of the story, so by the end of this section (approximately page 30 in the screenplay), the protagonist must make a decision that propels him/her into the story proper. What does this mean? Let’s say you have an action story involving a retired special ops expert who has to save the world from a terrorist organization. The turning point at the end of Act 1 is when our hero gets his orders, agrees to go back into service, and starts out to stop the villains.

In a 2-hour movie, expect a turning point every half hour (or every 30 pages in your screenplay). At the half-way mark, which falls in the middle of Act 2, have another major turning point. In our special ops actioner, this turning point may be that one of our hero’s reliable men turns out to be a double agent, or some new information reveals that who we thought was the villain may be untrue, or something happens that ups the stakes like the hero’s team gets wiped out and he is taken prisoner so must now escape in order to stop the bad guys. You get the idea. The rest of Act 2 plays out as a result of this turning point, which leads up to the end of Act 2 and the last major turning point. Here is where the story now enters its resolution, otherwise known as Act 3. Act 2’s final turning point brings the story development to an end–it is a major event that directs our attention now to the final showdown between the protagonist and the antagonist. Act 3 now builds up to the climax, which ends our tale.

You can think of outlining as simply listing the major events of the story–A) the beginning (or “hook”), B) the turning point at the end of Act 1 (where the hero actually begins to deal with the conflict), C) the mid-Act 2 turning point (where the story takes a sharp left turn), D) the turning point at the end of Act 2 (where the story finally comes together and leads to the resolution), and E) the climax (which ends the conflict). Everything else is simply the details on how to go from one point to another. There are countless ways of getting from the beginning of the story to the end, and it’s easy to get overwhelmed in between. By breaking the story into smaller chunks, it’s easier to focus on depicting the events in a half hour segment at a time. We move from point A to point B, then to point C before moving to point D, and finally to point E rather than having to go directly from A to E.

Flesh out the details

Now that you have the outline organized into four sections (Act 1, the first half of Act 2, the second half of Act 2, and Act 3) with an ending to each and your notes placed in the appropriate categories, it’s time to add details. What scenes are needed to tell each section of the story? Number the scenes and write out a brief description of what happens in each one. This is the point where you integrate the notes into the narrative. Keep it simple and do not worry about grammar, spelling, or proper formatting; however, the more details you add at this stage will make the story better. It is okay to jot down lines of dialogue to be said in the scenes, but it’s not mandatory. Scenes can be re-ordered and moved around to best fit the needs of the story with ease; doing this during the screenplay stage can be burdensome. Your outline should now look something like this:

Act 1

Opening “hook”

Introduce protagonist

Develop setting

Introduce supporting characters

Introduce conflict

Protagonist faces a crisis that needs a decision to be made

Act 2 (1st half)

Protagonist begins his quest to resolve the conflict

Stuff happens

More stuff happens

Other things take place

Turning point that surprises the protagonist

Act 2 (2nd half)

Protagonist reacts to this new twist

Things go on

Additional things happen

We move closer toward all plot points coming together

A major event happens that brings story development to a close, but now the conflict needs to be resolved

Act 3

Protagonist and antagonist begin their final showdown

We move closer to the showdown

The climax, where the protagonist and antagonist face off for the last time

Other loose ends get tied up

Happy ending

Obviously, this is a simplistic outline. The details of your own story will be much different, but should follow this basic premise. Once you have a solid outline where you can see the major turning points and the details that flesh out the story, then you are ready to begin the serious work on writing your screenplay.