Total life events of characters
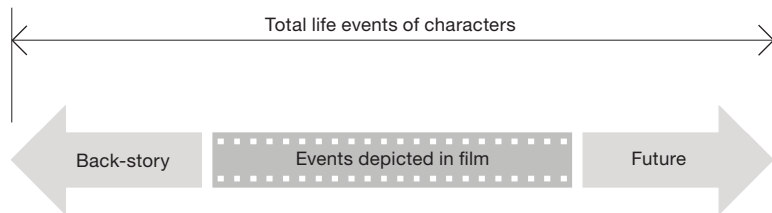
Back-story | Events depicted in film | Future

A story moves backward as it moves forward.

Back-story consists of events that occurred prior to the start of a film: childhood traumas, recent crises, longstanding grudges, the history of the physical setting, and much more. Back-story should be revealed obliquely through casual, but efficient, cues. A woman seen in a Chanel suit at the unemployment office will efficiently inform the viewer of a life that recently underwent dramatic change. A character asking "Are you still in love with him?" might tell everything one needs to know about a romantic history. And a single on-screen event can demonstrate a long-term pattern: A man storms out on his wife in the midst of an argument, and she hurls a high-heeled shoe at him. The shoe hits the door, and a dozen heel marks are seen on the door as it slams shut.

When having difficulty developing or resolving a narrative, look to the back-story, as poor back-story exposition can shadow an entire film.
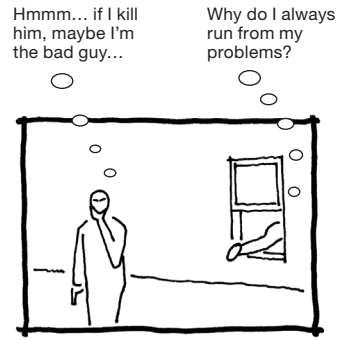
Create tangible objects of desire.

A protagonist's goals can be initially abstract, but must become more concrete as a story unfolds. Make goals visual, tangible, and active: proving one's innocence, vanquishing the villain, solving a mystery, acquiring an object or piece of knowledge, producing an event, acquiring an award.

A **MacGuffin**—a term popularized by Alfred Hitchcock—is a specific goal deemed important by the characters early on but that turns out to be irrelevant or worthless to the larger cause.
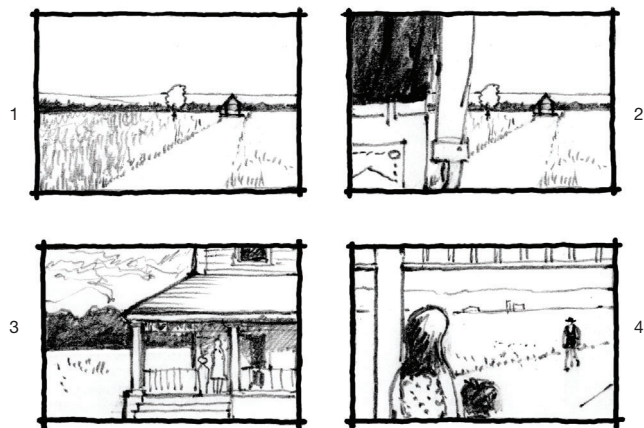
Plot

Story

Plot is physical events; story is emotional events.

Plot is what happens in a movie; story is how the characters feel about what happens. In *The Dark Knight*, the plot sets good guy against bad guy, as Batman seeks to protect Gotham City from the deranged Joker. But the story of *The Dark Knight* is the moral crisis Batman faces in risking his reputation for a greater good.

1 2 3 4

Tell a story at different scales.

A full range of shots (called "coverage") conveys a variety of information and emotions, provides visual variety, lends rhythm and pacing, and gives a director more choices during editing.

Wide Shot (WS; also called Master Shot or Establishing Shot): a broad view that places the action in a physical context the viewer can fully grasp.
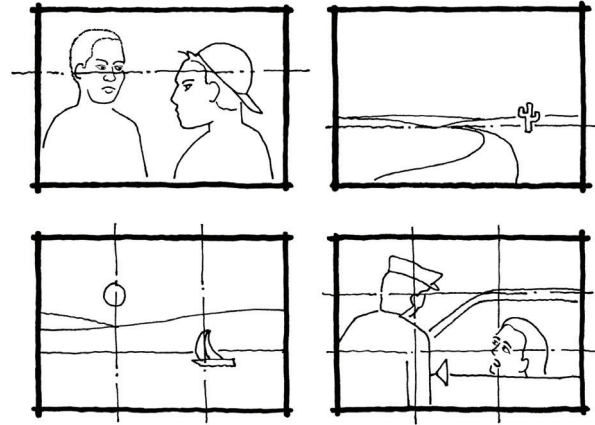
Full Shot (also called Long Shot): frames a person from head to toe. Frequently used for an entrance, exit, or "walk and talk" (following a character).

Medium Shot (MS): shows a character from the waist up. Primarily used for two or three characters in conversation.

Medium Close-up (MCU): shows a character from the shoulders or chest up; used for more intimate conversations.

Close Up (CU): shows a character from the neck up; commonly used to capture one side of an intimate conversation or reveal facial detail, such as a bead of sweat.

Extreme Close Up (ECU): shows a character (or object) in great detail, usually the eyes and nose. Can indicate subtext, irony, dishonesty, or detailed activity such as applying make-up.

The rule of thirds

Directly centering an object or actor in a frame tends to create a static image which is usually uninteresting and unchallenging to the eye. But by dividing the frame into thirds in both directions you will have a rough guide for effective placement.

For broad vistas, the horizon line is usually at the lower third. Primary objects are usually best placed at or near an intersection rather than in an open zone. An actor's eyes should usually be near the upper third line. An exception is when conveying a character's isolation or inertia, when a dead-center placement might work best.

After a scene from *A Few Good Men*, 1992

The climax is the *truth*.

A climax is not just the point of highest action or plot revelation; it is the moment at which the protagonist recognizes his or her existential core. The protagonist's false self, previously supported by secrets, lies, shame, or fear, is stripped away so that a truer, more fulfilled self can emerge. A hero accepts truth and evolves in the face of it, except in a tragedy, where an inability to evolve leads to a tragic outcome.

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