

Excerpts from McKee's *Story*

A STORY EVENT creates a meaningful change in the life situation of a character that is expressed in terms of VALUE. 33

STORY VALUES are the universal qualities of human experience that may shift from positive to negative, or negative to positive from one moment to the next. 35

A story even creates a meaningful change in the life situation of a character that is expressed and experienced in terms of a value and ACHIEVED THROUGH CONFLICT. 35

STORY CLIMAX: A story is a series of acts that build to a last act climax which brings about absolute and irreversible change [for the character]. 42

The smaller the world, the more complete the knowledge of the writer, therefore the greater his creative choices. 72

TRUE CHARACTER is revealed in the choices a human being makes under pressure--the greater the pressure, the deeper the revelation, the truer the choice to the character's essential nature. 101

The revelation of true character in contrast or contradiction to characterization is fundamental to all fine storytelling. Life teaches this grand principle: What *seems* is not what *is*. People are not what they appear to be. 103

The relative complexity of character must be adjusted to genre. *Action/Adventure* and *Farce* demand simplicity of character. Stories of personal or inner conflict demand complexity of character. 107

"...for a film to have a chance in the world, the last act and its climax must be the most satisfying experience of all...if the final movement fails, the film will die over its opening weekend." 107

Character and story structure are equally important because they simultaneously influence one another. 114?

Stories start with a premise. What would happen if.... 114?

Master storytellers never explain. They do the hard, painfully creative thing--they dramatize...Explanations of authorial ideas, whether in dialogue or narration, seriously diminish a film's quality. A great story authenticates its ideas solely within the dynamics of its events; failure to express a view of life through the pure, honest consequences of human choice and action is a creative defeat.... 114

Story tells you its meaning; you do not dictate meaning to the story. You do not draw action from idea, rather idea from action. 118

The protagonist is a willful being with willfulness powerful enough to sustain desire through conflict and ultimately take actions the create meaningful irreversible change. 137

The protagonist has the capacities to pursue the Object of Desire convincingly...for the audience to believe that he could be doing what they see him doing and that he has a chance for fulfillment. 139

The protagonist must be empathic, "someone to get behind," "someone to root for." 141

Here's a simple test to apply to any story. Ask:... What is the worst thing that will happen to the protagonist if he does not achieve his desire?...if the answer is, life would go back to normal, this story is not worth telling. 151

True action is physical, vocal, or mental movement that opens gaps in expectation and creates significant change. Mere activity is behavior in which what is expected happens, generating either no change or trivial change [for the character]. 152

To create revealing human reactions, you must not only get inside your character, you must get inside yourself...You ask "If I were this character in these circumstances, what would I do?" Using Stanislavski's "Magic if," you act the role. 153

We [do not] imagine a scene from one end to the other locked in a single character's point of view. Rather...the writer shifts points of view. He settles into the conscious center of a character and asks the question:"If I were this character in these circumstances, what would I do?"...Once you've created an honest moment from one point of view, you...[move to] another point of view so you can invade that, create an unexpected reaction, and splinter open the cleft between expectation and result. 177-178.

If two characters in your cast share the same attitude and react in kind to whatever occurs, you must either collapse the two into one, or expel one from the story. When characters react the same, you minimize opportunities for conflict. Instead, the writer's strategy must be to maximize these opportunities. 184

...the writer must keep us involved till FADE OUT. To do so, he must convince us that the world of his story is authentic...[which is] true to itself in scope, depth and detail (186). Authenticity depends on the "telling detail." When we use a few selected details, the audience's imagination supplies the rest, completing a credible whole...Beyond physical and social detail, we must create emotional authenticity....Beyond behavior credibility, the story itself must persuade. From event to event, cause and effect must be convincing, logical. 188

The writer whose knowledge of subject has taught him exactly what to stress and expand versus what to lay down quietly and subtly will stand out from the thousands of others who always hit the same note. 188

The INCITING INCIDENT radically upsets the balance of forces in the protagonist's life. 189

...the inciting incident...arouses in him [the protagonist] the desire to restore balance. Out of this need...the protagonist conceives of an Object of Desire: something physical or situational or attitudinal that he feels he lacks or needs to put the ship of life on an even keel. Lastly, the inciting incident propels the protagonist into an active pursuit of this object or goal. 192

For better or worse, an event throws a character's life out of balance, arousing in him the conscious and/or unconscious desire for that which he feels will restore balance, launching him on a Quest for his Object of Desire against forces of antagonism (inner, personal, extrapersonal). He may not achieve it. This is story in a nutshell. 196-197

The inciting incident of the the Central Plot must happen on screen....198.

...the Inciting Incident projects an image of the Obligatory Scene into the audience's imagination. The Obligatory Scene (AKA Crisis) is an event the audience knows it must see before the story can end. This scene will bring the protagonist into a confrontation with the most powerful forces of antagonism in this quest, forces stirred to life by the Inciting Incident that will gather focus and strength through the course of the story. This scene is called "obligatory" because having teased the audience into anticipating this moment, the writer is obliged to keep his promise and show it to them. 199

The inciting incident occurs within the first 25 percent of the telling. 200

If it [the Inciting Incident] arrives too soon, the audience may be confused. If it arrives too late, the audience may be bored. The instant the audience has a sufficient understanding of character and world to react fully, execute your Inciting Incident. 203

A story must not retreat to actions of lesser quality or magnitude, but move more progressively forward to a final action beyond which the audience cannot imagine another. 209

...Nothing moves forward in a story except through conflict. 210

Following Aristotle's principle: A story can be told in one act--a series of scenes that shape a few sequences that build up to one major reversal, ending the story. But if so, it must be brief. This is the prose short story, the one-act play, or the student or experimental film of perhaps five to twenty minutes. 217

Repetitiousness is the enemy of rhythm. The dynamics of story depend on the alternation of its value - charges. 225

The screenwriting is the art of making the mental *physical*. We create visual correlatives for inner conflict--not dialogue or narration to describe ideas and emotions, but images of character choice and action to indirectly and ineffably express the thoughts and feelings within. 231

To express our vision scene by scene we crack open the surface of our fictional reality and send the audience back to gain insight. These insights, therefore, must be shaped into *Setups and Payoffs*. To set up means to layer in knowledge; to pay off means to close the gap by delivering that knowledge to the audience. When the gap between expectation and result propels the audience back through the story seeking answers, it can only find them if the writer has prepared or planted these insights in the work. 239

We do not move the emotions of an audience by putting glistening tears in a character's eyes, by writing exuberant dialogue so an actor can recite his joy, by describing an erotic embrace, or by calling for angry music. Rather, we render the precise experience necessary to *cause* an emotion, then take the audience through that experience. For Turning Points not only deliver insight, they create the dynamics of emotion. 243

The understanding of how we create the audience's emotional experience begins with the realization that there are only two emotions-pleasure and pain. Each has its variations: joy, love, happiness, rapture, fun, ecstasy, thrill, bliss, and many others on one hand, and anguish, dread, anxiety, terror, grief, humiliation, malaise, misery, stress, remorse, and many others on the other hand. But at heart life gives us only one or the other. 243

As audience, we experience an emotion when the telling takes us through a transition of values. 243

Story must create these dynamic alternations between positive and negative emotion [values] in order to obey the *Law of Diminishing Returns*. The Law of Diminishing Returns, true in life as well as in story is this: *The more often we experience something, the less effect it has*. Emotional experience, in other words, cannot be repeated back-to-back with effect. 244

There is, however, one exception [to dynamic alternations between positive and negative emotion]: a story can go from positive to positive or negative to negative, *if* the contrast between these events is so great, in retrospect the first takes on shades of its opposite. 245

Human nature dictates that each of us will always choose the "good" or the "right" *as we perceive the "good" or the "right."* It is impossible to do otherwise. 248

True choice is dilemma. It occurs in two situations. First *a choice between irreconcilable goods*: From the character's view two things are desirable, he wants both, but circumstances are forcing him to choose only one. Second, *a choice between the lesser of two evils*: From the character's view two things are

undesirable, he wants neither, but circumstances are forcing him to choose one. (249) [The choices] must be of equal weight and value. 251

An old Hollywood expression goes: "If the scene is about what the scene is about, you're in deep shit." It means writing "on the nose," writing dialogue and activity in which a character's deepest thoughts and feelings are expressed by what the characters says and does--writing the subtext directly into text. 253

To see if a scene works, measure its driving force as an infinitive: such as, "to do this..." or "to get that...". Next, look across the scene and ask: What forces of antagonism block this desire?...This too is best expressed as an infinitive: "Not to do that..." or "To get this instead..." If the scene is well written, when you compare the set of phrases expressing the desires from each side, you'll see that they're in direct conflict--not tangential. 258

A beat is an exchange of action/reaction in character behavior...Look outwardly, in terms of what the character seems to be doing, and, more important, look beneath the surface to what he is actually doing. Name this *subtextual action* with a gerund phrase, such as "Begging." Try to find phrases that not only indicate action but touch the feelings of the character...Now look across the scene to see what reaction that action brought, and describe that action with an active gerund phrase...This exchange of action and reaction is a beat...A new beat doesn't occur until the behaviour clearly changes. 258-259

At the end of the scene, examine the value-charged condition of the character's situation and describe it in positive/negative terms. [If the charge at the beginning of the scene is the same at the end], the [scene] is a non-event...the scene is flat. If on the other hand, the value has undergone change, the the scene has turned. 259

Most director's cameras drink up whatever is visually expressive in one location within two or three minutes. If a scene goes on longer, the shots become redundant...The average scene length of two to three minutes is a reaction to the nature of cinema and the audience's hunger for a stream of expressive moments. 291-292

As we design cycles of rising action, we must at the same time transition the audience smoothly through them. Between two scenes, therefore, we need a third element, the link that joins the tail of Scene A with the head of Scene B...[they can be made in common or opposition]. [Transition material includes] a *characterization trait...an action...an object...a word...a quality of light...a sound...an idea...* 301-302

All scenes must be thematically or structurally justified in the light of the Climax. If they can be cut without disturbing the impact of the ending, they must be cut.

..we give the audience the experience [the climax: an up turning, down turning, or ironic one] we've promised, but not in the way it expects. This is what separates artist from amateur. 311

The *Resolution*...has three possible uses...First...[to] provide an opportunity to [conclude] a subplot. This however can be awkward...A second use of a Resolution is to show the spread of climactic effects [how the climax affected the character's lives]...Even if the first two uses don't apply, all films need a Resolution as a courtesy to the audience...so the audience can catch its breath, gather its thoughts, and leave the cinema with dignity. 312-314

THE PRINCIPLE OF ANTAGONISM; A protagonist and his story can only be as intellectually fascinating and emotionally compelling as the forces of antagonism make them. 317

Human nature is fundamentally conservative. We never do more than we have to, expend any energy we don't have to, take any risks we don't have to, change *if we don't have to*...Therefore, what will cause a protagonist to become a fully realized, multidimensional, and deeply empathetic character?...The more powerful and complex the forces of antagonism opposing the character, the more completely realized character and story *must* become. 317

Life, however, is subtle and complex, rarely a case of yes/no, good/evil, right/wrong. There are degrees of negativity...the *Contradictory* value...is the direct opposite of the positive...Between the Positive value and its Contradictory, however, is the *Contrary*: a situation that's negative but not necessarily illegal...The Contradictory, however is not the limit of human experience...*Negation of the Negation*, a force of antagonism that's doubly negative. 319

Fine writers have always understood that opposite values are not the limit of human experience. If a story stops at the Contradictory value, or worse, the Contrary, it echoes the hundreds of mediocrities we suffer every year. If a story does not reach the Negation of the Negation, it may strike the audience as satisfying--but never brilliant, never sublime. 332

The famous axiom, "Show, don't tell" is the key. Never force words into a character's mouth to *tell* the audience about the world, history or person. Rather, *show* us honest, natural scenes in which human beings talk and behave in honest, natural ways...yet at the same time indirectly pass along the necessary facts. In other words, *dramatize exposition*. 334

To dramatize exposition apply this mnemonic principle: *Convert exposition to ammunition*...Let them use what they know as ammunition in their struggle to get what they want. 335

Confident writers parse out exposition, bit by bit, through the entire story, often revealing exposition well into the Climax of the last act. They follow these two principles: Never include anything the audience can reasonably and easily assume has happened. Never pass on exposition unless the missing fact would cause confusion. You do not keep the audience's interest by giving it information, but by *withholding* information, except that which is absolutely necessary for comprehension. 335-336

We can turn scenes only one of two ways: on action or on revelation. There are no other means. 340

Voice-over narration is yet another way to divulge exposition. Like the Flashback, it's done well or ill. The test of narration is this: Ask yourself, "If I were to strip the voice-over out of my screenplay, would the story still be well told?" If the answer is yes...keep it in. 344

Second, never use coincidence to turn and ending. This is deus ex machina, the writer's greatest sin. 357

Deus ex machina not only erases all meaning and emotion, it's an insult to the audience. Each of us knows we must choose and act, for better or worse, to determine the meaning of our lives. No one and nothing coincidental will come along to take that responsibility from us, regardless of the injustices and chaos around us. 358

Melodrama is not the result of overexpression, but of under motivation; not writing too big, but writing with too little desire. The power of an event can only be as great as the sum total of its causes. We feel a scene is melodramatic if we cannot believe that motivation matches action. 370

We...burrow into a character to discover his aspects, his potential, then create an event geared to his unique nature--the Inciting Incident. For each protagonist it's different...but we design the event to fit the character, the precise happening needed to send him on a quest that reaches the limits of his being. 375

Do not reduce characters to case studies (an episode of child abuse is the cliché in vogue at the moment), for in truth there are no definitive explanations for anyone's behavior. *Generally, the more the writer nails motivation to specific causes, the more he diminishes the character in the audience's mind.* Rather, think through to a solid understanding of motive, but at the same time leave some mystery around the whys, a touch of the irrational perhaps, room for the audience to use its own life experience to enhance your character in its imagination. 376

Decorating a protagonist with quirks does not open his character and draw empathy. Rather, eccentricities may close him off and keep us at a distance...*Dimension means contradiction*: either within deep character (guilt-ridden ambition) or between characterization and deep character (a charming thief). These contradictions must be *consistent* [throughout the story]...Dimensions fascinate; contradictions in nature or behavior rivet the audience's concentration. Therefore, the protagonist must be the most dimensional character in the cast to focus empathy on the star role. If not the *Center of Good* decenters; the fictional universe flies apart; the audience loses balance. 378

...the protagonist creates the rest of the cast. All other characters are in a story first and foremost because of the relationship they strike to the protagonist and the way each helps to delineate the dimension of the protagonist's complex nature...These supporting characters must round him [the protagonist] out so that his complexity is both consistent and credible...They [other characters] are principally to make clear and believable, through action and reaction, the complexity of the central role. 379

...a comic character is created by assigning him the role a “humour,” an obsession the character does not see. 382

Leave room for the actor. This old Hollywood admonition asks that writer to provide each actor with the maximum opportunity to use his or her creativity; not to overwrite and pepper the page with constant description of behaviors, nuances of gesture, tones of voice. 383

Fall in love with all your characters. We often see films with a cast of excellent characters...except one who's dreadful. We wonder why until we realize that the writer hates this characters. He's trivializing and insulting this role at every opportunity...embrace all your creations, especially the bad people. They deserve love like everyone else. 384-385

Dialogue is not conversation. Eavesdrop on any coffee shop conversation and you'll realize in a heartbeat you'd never put that slush onscreen. Real conversation is full of awkward pauses, poor word choices and phrasing, non-sequiturs, pointless repetitions; it seldom makes a point or achieves closure. 388

First, screen dialogue requires compression and economy. Screen dialogue must say the maximum in the fewest possible words. Second, it must have direction. Each exchange of dialogue must turn the beats of the scene in one direction or another across the changing behaviors, without repetition. Third, it should have purpose, Each line or exchange of dialogue executes a step in design that builds and arcs the scene around its Turning Point. All the precision, yet it must sound like talk, using an informal and natural vocabulary, complete with contractions, slang, even if necessary, profanity. 389

Screen dialogue demands short, simply constructed sentences--generally, a movement from noun to verb to object or from noun to complement in that order. 389

The best advice for writing film dialogue is *don't*. Never write a line of dialogue when you can create a visual expression. The first attack on every scene should be: How could I write this in a purely visual way and not have to resort to a single line of dialogue? Obey the Law of Diminishing Returns: The more dialogue you write, the less effect dialogue has. 393

The ontology of the screen is *an absolute present tense in constant vivid movement*. We write screenplay in the present tense because, unlike the novel, film is on the knife edge of the now--whether we flash back or forward, we jump to a new *now*. And the screen expresses relentless action. 395

On the page vividness springs from the name of the things. Nouns are the names of objects; verbs the names of actions. To write vividly, avoid generic nouns and verbs with adjectives and adverbs attached and see the name of the thing: Not “The carpenter uses a big nail,” but “The carpenter hammers a *spike*.” “Nail” is a generic noun, “big” an adjective. The solid, Anglo-Saxon “spike” pops a vivid image in the reader's mind, “nail” a blur. How big?...The same applies to verbs...And “move slowly”? “Slowly” is an adverb; “move” a vague, bland verb. Instead, name the action: “He pads across the room.” 395-396

Eliminate “is” and “are” throughout. Onscreen nothing is in a state of being; story life is an unending flux of change, of becoming. Not: “There is a big house on a hill above a small town.” “There is,” “They are,” “It is,” are the weakest possible ways into an English sentence. And what’s a “big house”? Chateau? Hacienda? A “hill”? Ridge? Bluff? A “small town”? Crossroads? Hamlet? Perhaps: “A mansion guards the headlands above the village.”...Fine film description requires an imagination and a vocabulary. 396

Eliminate “we see” and “we hear.” “We” doesn’t exist. Once into the story ritual, the theatre could be empty for all we care. Instead, “We see” injects an image of the crew looking through the lens and shatters the script reader’s vision of the film. 397

[Successful writers tend to] typically spend the first...months writing on stacks of three-by-five cards: a stack for each act...On these cards they create the story’s *step-outline*...Using one- or two-sentence statements, the writer simply and clearly describes what happens in each scene, how it builds and turns. For example: “He enters expecting to find her at home, but instead discovers her note saying she’s left for good.” On the back of each card the writer indicates what the step in the design of the story he sees this scene fulfilling--at least for the moment. 412

Finally, after weeks or months, the writer discovers his Story Climax. With that in hand, he reworks, as needed, backward from it. At last he has a story. Now he goes to friends...pours a cup of coffee and asks for ten minutes. Then he pitches his story... Regardless of genre, if a story can’t work [hold attention and incite a strong emotional reaction of the listener] in ten minutes, how will it work in 110 minutes: It won’t get better when it gets bigger. Everything that’s wrong with it in a ten-minute pitch is ten times worse on screen. 413-414

To “treat” the step-outline, the writer expands each scene from its one or two sentences to a paragraph or more of double-spaced, present-tense, moment by moment description. 414

Writing a screenplay from a thorough treatment is a joy and often runs at a clip of five to ten pages per day. We now convert treatment description to screen description and add dialogue. And dialogue written at this point is invariably the finest dialogue we’ve ever written. Our characters have had tape over their mouths for so long, they can’t wait to talk, and unlike so many films in which all characters speak with the same vocabulary and style, dialogue written after in-depth preparation creates character-specific voices. They don’t all sound like one another and they don’t all sound like the writer. 416

The wise writer puts off writing the dialogue for as long as possible because *the premature writing of dialogue chokes creativity*. Writing from the outside in--writing dialogue in search of scenes, writing scenes in search of story--*is the least creative method*. Screenwriters habitually overvalue dialogue because they’re the only words we write that actually reach the audience. All else is assumed by the film’s images. If we type out dialogue before we know *what happens*, we inevitably fall in love with our words; we’re loath to play with and explore events, to discover how fascinating our characters might become, because it would mean cutting our priceless dialogue. All improvisation ceases and our so-called rewriting is tinkering with speeches.

