

The Five Key Turning Points Of All Successful Movie Scripts

By [Michael Hauge](#)

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Hollywood movies are simple.

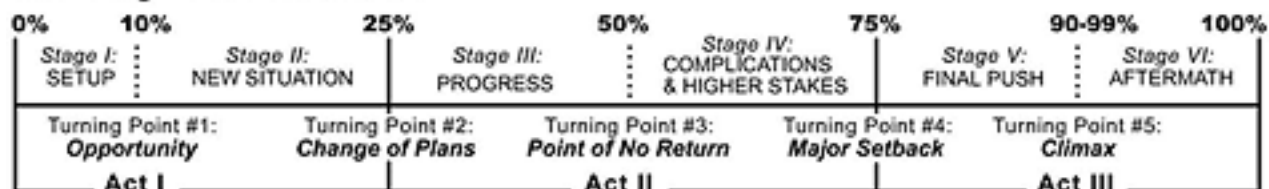
Though writing a successful Hollywood movie is certainly not easy, the stories for mainstream Hollywood films are all built on only three basic components: character, desire and conflict.

All film stories portray a hero who faces seemingly insurmountable obstacles as he or she pursues a compelling objective. Whether it's Clarice Starling trying to stop Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs*, Captain Miller Saving Private Ryan, or Billy Elliot trying to gain admission to a ballet school, all these protagonists confront overwhelming conflict in their pursuit of some visible goal.

Plot structure simply determines the sequence of events that lead the hero toward this objective. And whether you're writing romantic comedies, suspense thrillers, historical dramas or big budget science fiction, all successful Hollywood movies follow the same basic structure.

In a properly structured movie, the story consists of six basic stages, which are defined by five key turning points in the plot. Not only are these turning points always the same; they always occupy the same positions in the story. So what happens at the 25% point of a 90-minute comedy will be identical to what happens at the same percentage of a three-hour epic. These percentages apply both to the running time of the film and the pages of your screenplay. Since one script page equals approximately one minute on the screen, the 75% mark of a 120-page screenplay will occur at page 90, or about 90 minutes into the two-hour film.

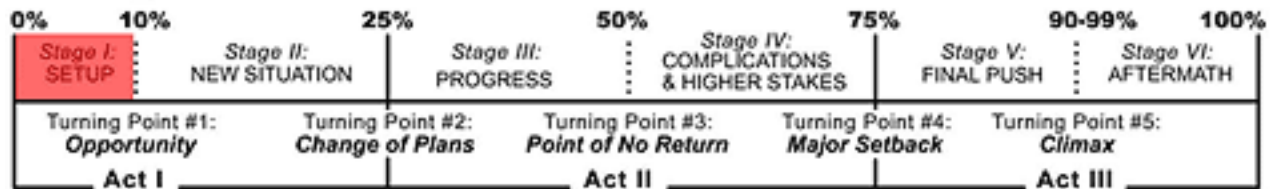
Michael Hauge's Six Stage Plot Structure



As I explain this six-stage process below, I'll refer to dozens of recent successful films. But I also want to take two recent blockbusters through this entire structural process:

Susannah Grant's screenplay for *Erin Brockovich*; and *Gladiator*, written by David H. Franzoni, John Logan and William Nicholson. One is a contemporary drama based on a true story; the other is a sweeping, action-filled, historical epic. But as different as these two films are in style, genre, length and subject matter, both made more than a hundred million dollars world wide, both were among the most critically acclaimed films of 2000, and both employ the same basic plot structure.

STAGE I: The Setup



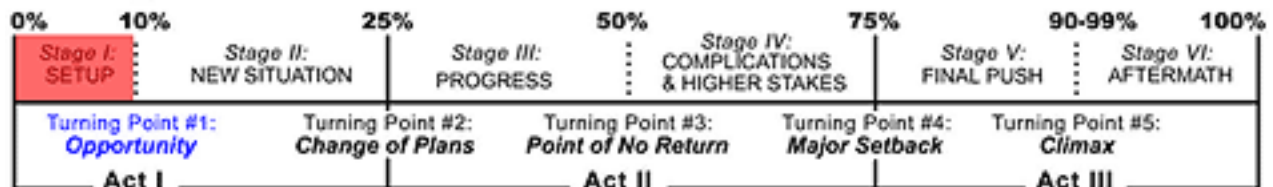
- **Erin Brokovich**: Erin is a broke, unemployed single mother who can't find a job, gets hit by a car, and loses her lawsuit.
- **Gladiator**: Maximus, Rome's most powerful, and most popular, general, leads his troops to victory in their final battle.

The opening 10% of your screenplay must draw the reader, and the audience, into the initial setting of the story, must reveal the everyday life your hero has been living, and must establish identification with your hero by making her sympathetic, threatened, likable, funny and/or powerful.

Cast Away transports us into the world of a FedEx executive, shows him as likable and good at his job, and creates sympathy and worry when he must leave the woman he loves at Christmas to fly off in dangerous weather.

Similarly, Bowfinger humorously reveals the sad existence of a good hearted but hapless director hustling to get a movie off the ground. Or think of the dangerous world of WWII submarines in U 571, or Lowell Bergman's mysterious, threatening pursuit of a story at the beginning of The Insider. These setups pull us out of our own existence and into the captivating world the screenwriter has created.

TURNING POINT #1: The Opportunity (10%)



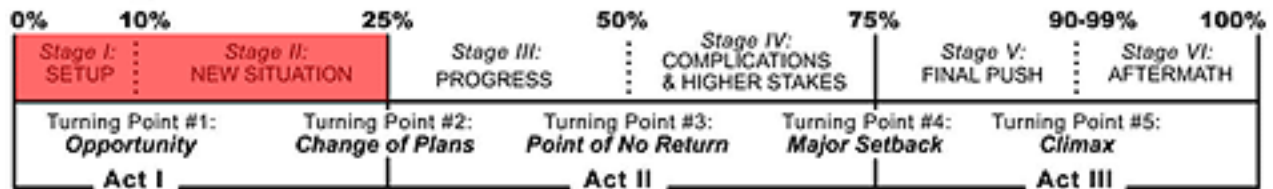
- **Erin Brokovich**: Erin forces Ed Masry to give her a job.
- **Gladiator**: Maximus is offered a reward by Emperor Marcus Aurelius, and he says he wants to go home.

Ten percent of the way into your screenplay, your hero must be presented with an opportunity, which will create a new, visible desire, and will start the character on her journey.

This is the point where Neo is taken to meet Morpheus and wants to learn about The Matrix, or where Ike gets fired and wants to go meet the Runaway Bride.

Notice that the desire created by the opportunity is not the specific goal that defines your story concept, or the finish line your hero must cross at the end of the film. It is rather a desire to move into...

STAGE 2: The New Situation



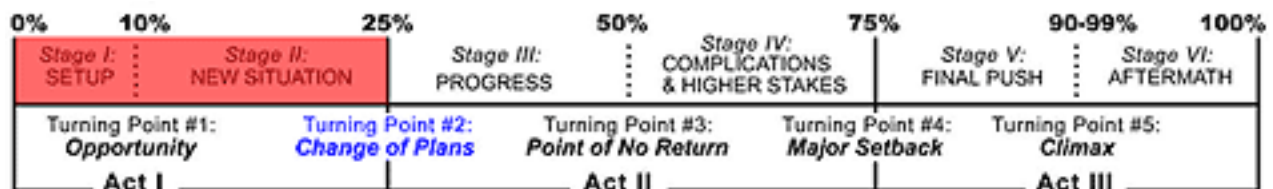
- **Erin Brokovich**: Erin begins working for Ed Masry's law firm, meets her neighbor George, starts looking into a case in Hinkley, California, involving PG&E, but gets fired.
- **Gladiator**: Maximus is asked by the dying Emperor to take control of Rome and give it back to the people, in spite of the ambition of his son Commodus.

For the next 15% of the story, your hero will react to the new situation that resulted from the opportunity. During this stage, the hero gets acclimated to the new surroundings, tries to figure out what's going on, or formulates a specific plan for accomplishing his overall goal: Fletcher has to figure out that he's been cursed to tell the truth in *Liar, Liar*; and Mrs. Doubtfire devises the plan for seeing his children.

Very often story structure follows geography, as the opportunity takes your hero to a new location: boarding the cruise ships in *Titanic* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*; going to Cincinnati to bury his father in *Rain Man*; the President taking off on Air Force One.

In most movies, the hero enters this new situation willingly, often with a feeling of excitement and anticipation, or at least believing that the new problem he faces can be easily solved. But as the conflict starts to build, he begins to realize he's up against far greater obstacles than he realized, until finally he comes to...

TURNING POINT #2: The Change of Plans (25%)



- **Erin Brokovich**: Erin gets rehired to help win a suit against PG&E.
- **Gladiator**: Maximus, after learning that Commodus has murdered his father, vows to stop the new emperor and carry out Marcus Aurelius' wishes.

Something must happen to your hero one-fourth of the way through your screenplay that will transform the original desire into a specific, visible goal with a clearly defined end point.

This is the scene where your story concept is defined, and your hero's outer motivation is revealed.

Outer motivation is my term for the visible finish line the audience is rooting for your hero to achieve by the end of the film. It is here that Tess discovers that Katherine has stolen her idea in *Working Girl*, and now wants to close the deal herself by posing as a broker. This is what we're rooting for Tess to do, and we know that when she's accomplished this goal (or failed to), the movie will be over.

This is arguably the most important structural principle you can master. If your hero's visible goal is defined too early in your script, the story will run out of steam long before the climax. If the outer motivation isn't defined until the half way point, the reader will have lost interest and moved on to another screenplay.

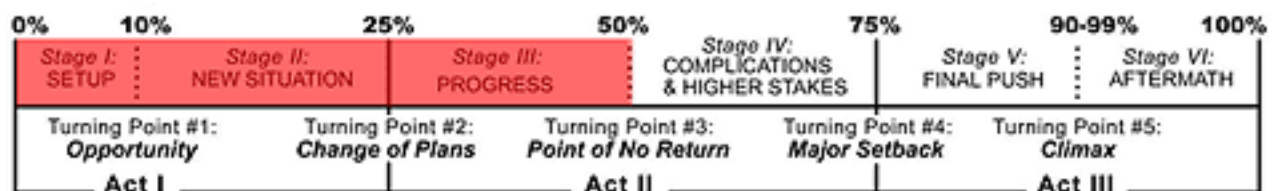
You've probably noticed how often I've used the word visible in this article. I want to prevent any confusion between the plot of your movie and the inner journey your hero takes.

Structure is a formula for laying out the events we see on the screen. Your characters' growth or arc, which will be gradually revealed throughout the story, grows out of their pursuit of the visible goal, but it doesn't conform to these strict turning points.

This is one of those principles that sounds simple, but is hard to incorporate in your writing. Hollywood movies are built on what the characters do as they pursue a clearly defined endpoint or outcome. Because much of what we respond to emotionally grows out of the hero's longings, wounds, fears, courage and growth, we often focus on these elements as we develop our stories. But these invisible components of the story can emerge effectively only if they grow out of a simple, visible desire.

On rare occasions, as in *My Best Friend's Wedding* or *The American President*, the outer motivation (breaking up the wedding; passing the crime bill) is declared at the 10% mark, but the plan for accomplishing the goal won't be defined, and no action will be taken, until the one-quarter mark. It is at that point that your hero begins to experience...

STAGE III: Progress



- **Erin Brokovich**: Erin gathers evidence, gets Hinkley residents to hire Ed to represent them, and gets romantically involved with George.
- **Gladiator**: Maximus is taken to be killed, escapes to find his family murdered, and is captured and sold to Proximo, who makes him a powerful gladiator.

For the next 25% of your story, your hero's plan seems to be working as he takes action to achieve his goal: Ethan Hunt begins closing in on the villain in *Mission: Impossible 2*; or Pat gets involved with the woman of his dreams in *There's Something About Mary*.

This is not to say that this stage is without conflict. But whatever obstacles your hero faces, he is able to avoid or overcome them as he approaches...

TURNING POINT #3: The Point of No Return (50%)



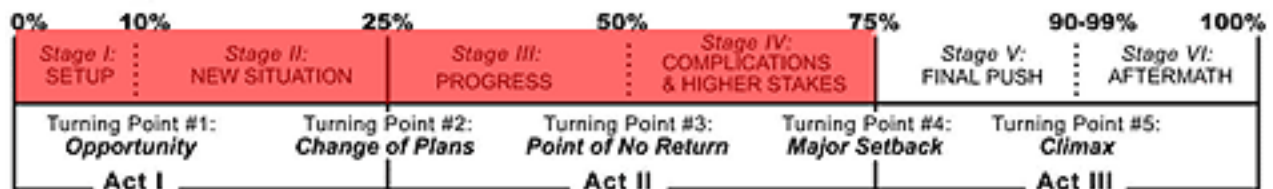
- **Erin Brokovich:** Erin and Ed file the lawsuit, risking dismissal by the judge, which would destroy any hope of a settlement.
- **Gladiator:** Maximus arrives in Rome, determined to win the crowd as a Gladiator so he can destroy Commodus.

At the exact midpoint of your screenplay, your hero must fully commit to her goal. Up to this point, she had the option of turning back, giving up on her plan, and returning to the life she was living at the beginning of the film. But now your hero must burn her bridges behind her and put both feet in (never let it be said that I can't work two hackneyed metaphors into the same sentence).

It is at precisely this moment that Thelma and Louise rob the grocery store, that Truman crosses the bridge in The Truman Show, and that Rose makes love with Jack in Titanic. These heroes are taking a much bigger risk, and exposing themselves to much greater jeopardy, than at any previous time in those films.

As a result of passing this point of no return, your hero must now face...

STAGE IV: Complications and Higher Stakes

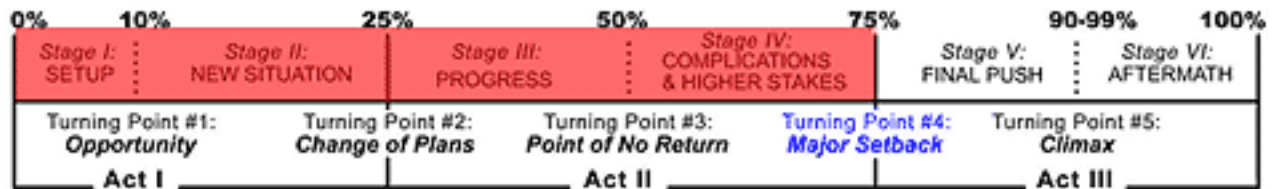


- **Erin Brokovich:** Erin sees less and less of George and her kids, Ed brings in a big firm that tries to squeeze Erin out of the picture and alienates the Hinkley plaintiffs.
- **Gladiator:** Maximus faces much greater battles in the arena, becomes a hero to the Roman people, and reveals his true identity to Commodus.

For the next 25% of your story, the obstacles become bigger and more frequent, achieving the visible goal becomes far more difficult, and your hero has much more to lose if he fails. After Mitch McDeere begins collecting evidence against The Firm at that movie's midpoint, he now must hide what he's doing from both the mob and the FBI (complications), and failure will result in either prison or death (higher stakes).

The conflict continues to build until, just as it seems that success is within your hero's grasp, he suffers...

TURNING POINT #4: The Major Setback (75%)

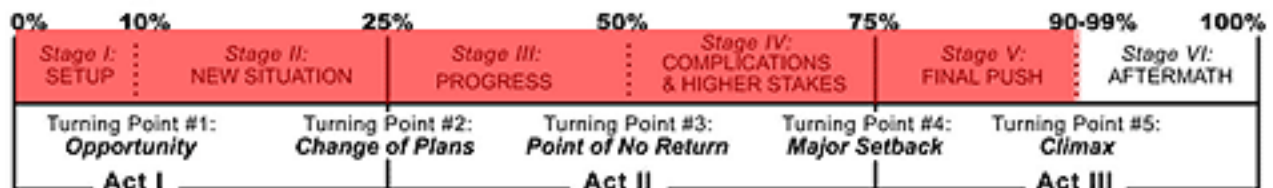


- **Erin Brokovich**: Most of the plaintiffs withdraw due to the bungled efforts of the new lawyers, and George leaves Erin.
- **Gladiator**: Maximus, declaring he is only a gladiator with no power, refuses to see Gracchus, the leader of the Senate, and Commodus plots to destroy both Maximus and the Senate.

Around page 90 of your screenplay, something must happen to your hero that makes it seem to the audience that all is lost: Carol dumps Melvin in *As Good As It Gets*; Morpheus is captured in *The Matrix*; and Annie Reed declares, “Sleepless in Seattle is history.” If you’re writing a romantic comedy like *Working Girl* or *What Women Want*, this is the point where your hero’s deception is revealed and the lovers break up.

These disastrous events leave your hero with only one option. He can’t return to the life he was living at the beginning of the film, since he eliminated that possibility when he passed the point of no return. And the plan he thought would lead to success is out the window. So his only choice is to make one, last, all-or-nothing, do-or-die effort as he enters...

STAGE V: The Final Push

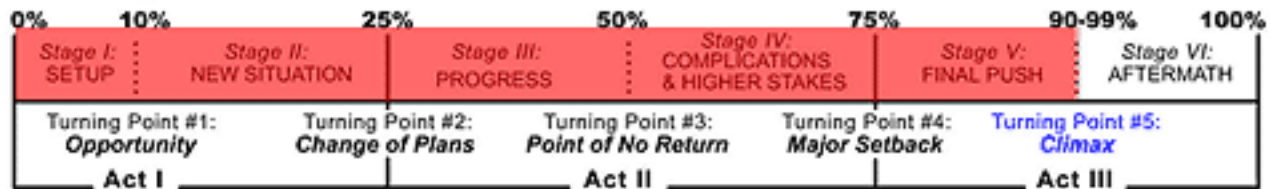


- **Erin Brokovich**: Erin must rally the Hinkley families to agree to binding arbitration and find evidence incriminating the PG&E corporate office.
- **Gladiator**: Maximus conspires to escape from Proximo, lead his former troops against Commodus, and give power over Rome to the Senate.

Beaten and battered, your hero must now risk everything she has, and give every ounce of strength and courage she possesses, to achieve her ultimate goal: Thelma and Louise must outrun the FBI to reach the border; and the Kennedy’s must attempt one final negotiation with the Soviets in *13 Days*.

During this stage of your script, the conflict is overwhelming, the pace has accelerated, and everything must work against your hero, until she reaches...

TURNING POINT #5: The Climax (90-99%)

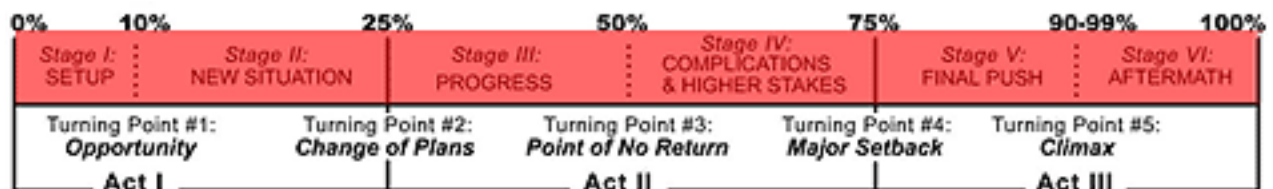


- **Erin Brokovich:** Erin and Ed win a \$330 million dollar settlement and George returns.
- **Gladiator:** Maximus has his final battle with Commodus in the arena.

Several things must occur at the climax of the film: the hero must face the biggest obstacle of the entire story; she must determine her own fate; and the outer motivation must be resolved once and for all. This is the big moment where our heroes go into the Twister; the Men In Black go up against the giant alien, and the Jewish factory workers make their escape in Schindler's List.

Notice that the climax can occur anywhere from the 90% point of your screenplay to the last couple minutes of the movie. The exact placement will be determined by the amount of time you need for...

STAGE VI: The Aftermath



- **Erin Brokovich:** Erin gets a \$2 million bonus, and continues working with Ed.
- **Gladiator:** Maximus is united with his family in death, and his body carried away in honor by the new leaders of the Roman republic.

No movie ends precisely with the resolution of the hero's objective; you must allow the audience to experience the emotion you have elicited in the exciting, sad or romantic climax. You may also need to explain any unanswered questions for the audience, and you want to reveal the new life the hero is living now that he's completed his journey.

In movies like Rocky, Thelma and Louise and The Truman Show, there is little to explain, and the writer's goal is to leave the audience stunned or elated. So the climax occurs near the very end of the film. But in most romantic comedies, mysteries and dramas, the aftermath will include the final five or ten pages of the script.

Understanding these stages and turning points provides you with an effective template for developing and writing your screenplay. Is your story concept defined at the one-quarter mark? Is your hero's goal truly visible, with a clearly implied outcome, and not just an inner desire for success, acceptance or self worth? Have you fully introduced your hero before presenting her with an opportunity around page 10? Does she suffer a major setback 75% of the way into your script?

But a word of caution: don't let all these percentages block your creativity. Structure is an effective tool for rewriting and strengthening the emotional impact of your story. But you don't want to be imprisoned by it. Come up with characters you love and a story that ignites your passion. Then apply these structural principles, to ensure that your screenplay will powerfully touch the widest possible audience.

About Michael Hauge

MICHAEL HAUGE is a story expert, author and lecturer who works with writers, filmmakers, marketers, business leaders, attorneys and public speakers, both in Hollywood and around the world. He has coached screenwriters, producers, stars and directors on projects for every major studio and network, most recently THE KARATE KID and CONCUSSION for Will Smith and Overbrook Entertainment; MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE for Columbia Pictures; BAKUGAN for Universal Pictures, and LOVE, ROSIE for SONY Pictures and Constantin Film.

Michael is the best selling author of *Selling Your Story in 60 Seconds: The Guaranteed Way to Get Your Screenplay or Novel Read*, as well as the new 20th Anniversary Edition of his classic book *Writing Screenplays That Sell*. A number of Michael's seminars, including *The Hero's 2 Journeys* with Christopher Vogler and *Add Hollywood Magic to Your Stories*, are available on DVD, CD and digital format through his web site, and through booksellers throughout the world.

Michael has a Masters Degree in Education from the University of Georgia. He has worked in Hollywood for the past 35 years, and has presented seminars, lectures and keynotes in person and online to more than 70,000 participants worldwide. He lives in Sherman Oaks, California.