<u>**COMPUTATIONAL THINKING IN DC 201: INTRODUCTION TO SCREENWRITING**</u>

1. Three-Act Structure for Narrative Screenplays

In order to construct a successful narrative screenplay, students need to understand the basic principles of structure and how it relates to the narrative arc of the script. Though writing a successful screenplay is certainly not easy, the stories for mainstream cinema are all built on only three basic components: character, desire and conflict.

Film stories portray heroes who face seemingly insurmountable obstacles as they pursue compelling objectives. Plot structure simply determines the sequence of events that lead the hero toward this objective. Whether students are writing romantic comedies, suspense thrillers, historical dramas or big budget science fiction, all successful screenplays 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 a screenplay.)
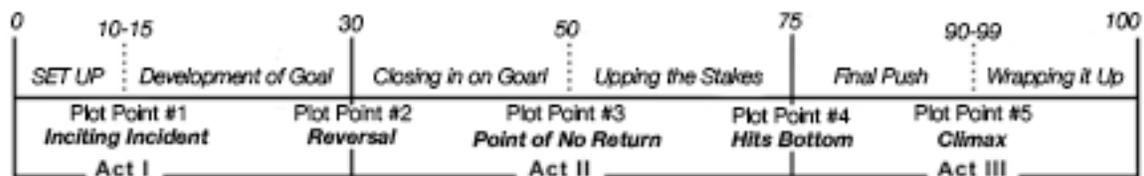
The Setup
The opening 10% of a screenplay must draw the audience into the setting of the story and must reveal the life the hero has been living, and must establish identification with the hero by making her/him sympathetic, vulnerable, likable, funny and/or powerful.

PLOT POINT #1: Opportunity or Inciting Incident
Ten percent of the way into a screenplay, the hero must be presented with an opportunity, or some sort of incident which turns his/her world upside down and creates a new, visible desire, which will start the character on his/her journey.

Development of Goal
For the next 15 to 30 pages of the story, the hero will react to the new situation that resulted from the inciting incident. He/she tries to figure out what's going on, or formulates a specific plan for accomplishing his/her overall goal.

PLOT POINT #2: Change of Plans or Reversal
Something must happen to the hero one-fourth of the way through the screenplay that will transform the original desire into a specific, visible goal with a clearly defined end point. This is the scene where the story concept is defined, and the hero's outer motivation is revealed.

Closing in on Goal
For the next 25% of your story, the hero's plan seems to be working as he/she takes action to achieve their goal. There must still be conflict but all obstacles the hero encounters seem fairly easy to overcome.

PLOT POINT #3: The Point of No Return
At the exact midpoint of the screenplay, the hero must fully commit to their goal. Up to this point, he/she had the option of turning back, giving up on the plan, and returning to the life he/she was living at the beginning of the film. But now the hero must cross the point of no return.

Upping the Stakes
For the next 25% of your story, achieving the visible goal becomes far more difficult, and the hero has much more to lose if he/she fails. This conflict continues to build until, just as it seems that success is within the hero's grasp, he/she suffers…

PLOT POINT #4: Hits Bottom
Around page 90 of your screenplay, something must happen to the hero that makes it seem to the audience that all is lost. These disastrous events leave the hero with only one option: he/she must make one, last, all-or-nothing, do-or-die effort as he/she enters…

Final Push to Goal
Beaten and battered, the hero must now risk everything he/she has, and give every ounce of strength and courage, to achieve their ultimate goal. During this stage of the script, the conflict is overwhelming, the pace has accelerated, and everything works against the hero, until they reach…

PLOT POINT #5: The Climax
Several things must occur at the climax of the film: the hero must face the biggest obstacle of the entire story; he/she must determine his/her own fate; and the outer motivation must be resolved once and for all.

Wrapping it Up
No movie ends precisely with the resolution of the hero's objective. A screenwriter must reveal the new life the hero is living now that he/she has completed their journey.

2. The Use of Abstraction for Narrative Screenplays

Understanding these stages and turning points provides students in DC 201 with a powerful tool for developing and writing their screenplay. Is the story concept defined at the one-quarter mark? Is the hero's goal truly visible, with a clearly implied outcome and not just an inner desire for success, acceptance or self worth? Have they fully introduced the hero before presenting him/her with an opportunity around page 10? Does she/he suffer a major setback 75% of the way into the script?

Structure is an effective template for creating the foundation of a movie script, rewriting and strengthening the emotional impact of a screen story. But students should not be imprisoned by it. Instead, they should come up with characters they love and a story that ignites their passion. Then apply these structural principles, to ensure that their screenplay will powerfully touch the widest possible audience.

Having these basic sets of rules in place, allows a student greater freedom to explore more personal and creative elements of their screenplay. The structure of the three-act narrative creates the script's spine, which the student can then flesh out in any way he or she is so inclined to do so. These rules of structure also provide students an opportunity to use abstraction when thinking of major turning points or plot points within the screenplay. Knowing that the inciting incident or *turning point #1* must occur at page 15 to 18 (10% into the script) means a student has a very limited amount of time to set up the three basic components of the script: character, desire and conflict.

3. Computational Thinking Exercise #1

Students will take the screenplays to three successful motion pictures (100 million dollars or more at the box office) and three box office flops all of different genres and break them down using the THREE ACT STRUCTURE as well as the FIVE PLOT POINTS.

Students will then compare the six scripts and plot them out using the structure formula outlined in class. They will then draw some conclusions on the theme, metaphor, premise, moral and hero's journey from their script comparisons.

Through this breakdown and comparison students will discover which screenplays follow the three-act structure and five plot points and which ones do not. In comparing the different plot points, paying close attention to the *inciting incident*, for comedies and dramas students will use *Abstraction* in determine why some motion picutres are successful (box office hits) while others are not despite being from different genres.