**IB Film: Year One 2.4**

**The Three Act Structure**

Syd Field and the Three-Act Structure

Syd Field, who worked as a Story Editor, wrote a number of books like *Screenplay* and *The Screen Writer's Workbook*in which he analysed the structure of narrative screenplays to provide a model for Screenwriters to follow.

His idea is that most screenplays have a Three-Act Structure.

The timing of each of these Acts is a crucial part of the idea.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, in his book *The Poetics*, considered plot the most important element of drama. He stated that plot could be divided into three parts -

**1. A Beginning, where the plot is set up**

**2. A Middle, where the plot reaches its climax**

**3. An End, where the plot is resolved.**

Today, 2500 years later, screenwriters follow that same plot format into structure that is divided into three acts:

**1. The Set-up**

**2. The Confrontation**

**3. The Resolution**

Although he spent most of his time giving advice to modern writers, and about the screenwriting industry, American screenwriter Syd Field is most recognized for breaking down the Three Act Structure and its relationship to modern film and screenwriting.

This has helped artists create new works as well as helping film scholars analyze the structure of film and how stories are told through this medium.

Within this structure,  Field states that a film s plot is set up in three acts -

**Act One (The Setup):**

Takes place within the first the first 10 -20 pages of the screenplay which correlates to the first 10 -30 minutes of the film production.

Within  this section the audience is subjected to the storys exposition which establishes the main characters, their relationships and the world in which they live.

Later in the Act One, an incident occurs that confronts the protagonist and poses the following -

The life of the protagonist will never be the same.

* Raises the dramatic question that will be answered in the climax of the film such as -
	+ Will X find the missing treasure?
	+ Will Y end up with the love of his life?
	+ Will Z catch the criminal that is ravaging the city?

This moment is known as the in citing incident or catalyst.  It is what drives the  protagonist throughout the rest of the story.

**Act Two (The Confrontation):**

Also referred to as rising action typically focuses on the protagonists attempt to resolve the problem only to find him/herself in a situation that becomes worse.

The reason that protagonists seem unable to resolve their problems is because they do not yet have the skills, ability or power to deal with the antagonistic force that they are facing.

The problem continues to become increasingly difficult for the protagonist, so they have to change or evolve in some way to directly deal with the conflict.

Most of the time this cannot be achieved alone so the protagonist is helped by mentors or teammates.

**Act Three (The Resolution):**

Features the resolution of the story and its subplots.

The protagonist and the antagonistic force (whether a character, internal element, or external entity) come to the highest point of conflict, a breaking point, where something has to give.

This moment is called the climax and the dramatic question posed in Act I will be answered, leaving the protagonist and other characters living within the storys world with a new sense of who they truly are.

# The Length of Acts

The length of Act 1 is one-quarter of the length of the entire script.

Most feature films ( films or full length movies made for initial distribution in cinemas as the main attraction of the screening, rather than a short film screened before it ) are roughly 120 minutes, or 2 hours, long.

Scripts are written in 12-point Courier font, which is the standard font and size for screenplays.

A page of script represents roughly 1 minute of screen time.

So the script for a feature film would be 120 pages long.

#### [**Sub-Plot**](https://learn.pamojaeducation.com/courses/246/module/3124/lesson/55066/length-of-acts)

12 point Courier font is used because the font for each letter and the space between each letter is exactly the same.

This derives from a time when newspaper Writers and Novelists were paid by the word, or for column inches.

Since many Screenplay Writers came from the world of professional writers in other mediums, this convention was retained.

In the case of your assignments for the IB, it means that everyone who uses this font for writing the Independent Study (where it is required) will have exactly the same amount of space in the overall page count.

## **Act 1 - The Set-up**

For a Feature film, the 'setup' will be 30 minutes.

An important aspect of this idea is that the proportions of the Acts stay the same regardless of the total length.

## **Act 2 - The Confrontation**

The length of Act 2 is half of the length of the entire script.

For a Feature film this will be 60 minutes, represented by 60 pages of screenplay.

#### [**Assessment Advice**](https://learn.pamojaeducation.com/courses/246/module/3124/lesson/55066/length-of-acts)

For a 3 minute IB film, the confrontation will be one minute and thirty seconds, approximately one and a half pages of script.

## **Act 3 - The Resolution**

Act 3 is a quarter of the length of the entire screenplay.

For a Feature film, this will be 30 minutes, represented by 30 pages of screenplay.

#### [**Assessment Advice**](https://learn.pamojaeducation.com/courses/246/module/3124/lesson/55066/length-of-acts)

For a 3 minute IB film, the resolution will be approximately 45 seconds, approximately 3/4 of a page of script.

# What happens in each Act?

## **Act One: The Setup - 30 Minutes**

The first section of the script has to quickly 'set up' with what Syd Field calls exposition.

This is the background of the story.

Important elements in Act One are Genre, setting, characters, and the relationships between the characters.

This Act also reveals the main characters, the dramatic premise, and the dramatic situation.

**Genre** is the type of film you are watching. If you have been in a video rental store, or read about films online, you will find that the films are often organised according to type. For film students, these Genres are much more complicated than simple labels such as Action. Part of this course will involve understanding the Genre Conventions and the many Genres that exist around the world.

**Setting** is the time and place the story is set.

**Characters** are any people in the story, from protagonist ( the character the viewer associates with the most ) and antagonist ( the character who blocks the protagonist's action ), to a whole series of relationships between other fully-developed characters and stock characters.

Stock characters appear briefly and are defined by their function in the story more than their characters. We do not know much about individual Stormtroopers in Star Wars, for example, except that they are bad in general and blocking our heroes' chances for success.

The **Main character** is the character whose needs and motivations drive the story.

**Dramatic premise** is the situation the story is about.

**Dramatic situation** is the circumstances surrounding the action.

### **Key Points in Act One**

In his thee-act model of the story, Syd Field, establishes two key points that are necessary parts of the story development. Besides the other features of Act One, he identifies the following points:

**Initiating incident**- which appears at around the 15 minute mark in a feature film is the point that sets the film's plot in motion. In Star Wars, it is the introduction of Luke Skywalker, which occurs in the middle of Act One. At this point we have been introduced to the Star Wars world by the robots, which is where and our story really begins.

**Plot point one -**the moment the film's protagonist makes their decision that sets the rest of the plot in motion. In Star Wars***,***this occourswhen Luke accepts Obi-Wan Kenobi's offer to train him as a Jedi knight, after Luke has discovered his family slain by Imperial Storm troopers. Now, there is no turning back.

## **Sub-plot**

#### [**The opening of Star Wars is a little unusual. . .**](https://learn.pamojaeducation.com/courses/246/module/3124/lesson/55066/content-of-acts)

. . .in that we do not meet our main character right away.

People who read the script before the film was made felt this was unusual, and as a director George Lucas shot material that introduced Luke earlier in the story.

Ultimately, George Lucas kept to his original idea to use the 2 robots, C-3PO and R2-D2, to introduce us to the world of Star Wars, a plot structure which was inspired by the films of Akira Kurosawa.

Star Wars has a very interesting structure that was borrowed from another film, Akira Kurosawa's Hidden Fortress.

That film started with 2 farmers whose lives get caught up in the adventures of a General and a Princess who are hiding in a hidden fortress.

Star Wars features 2 robots who are caught up in the adventures of Princess Leia, and must find General Obi-wan Kenobi ( note the very Japanese name for Alec Guinness's character ).

Of course, the hidden fortress here is the Death Star.

Director George Lucas acknowledges his debt to director Akira Kurosawa in other ways too.

His mystical knights of the old republic, the Jedi, are named after a Japanese film genre, the Jidai-geki.

The name means historical drama and the stories are set in the samurai dominated Edo period that lasted from 1603 to 1868.

Of course many things, from the lightsaber battles to the design of Darth Vader's helmet, also hearken back to elements from Japanese film.

## **Act Two: Confrontation - 60 Minutes**

Act Two is the longest act because it bears most of the dramatic development of the story, defining the confrontation between the protagonist and antagonist.

Syd Field sees obstacles as one of the most important elements of this confrontation. They are easy to understand. They are anything that blocks the protagonist's movement toward their goal.

The life of a hero is not easy in Star Wars. The fight in the Mos Eisley Cantina, the Imperial Star Destroyers that block the escape from Tatooine, the tractor beam that drags our heroes' spaceship into the Death Star . . . it seems there are problems everywhere Luke turns.

Another important element of Act Two is the moment Syd Field calls the first culmination. It is the point at which it seems the hero is close to achieveing their goal, just before everything falls apart.

Although our Star Wars heroes are still in a tough situation, the moment Luke steps into Princess Leia's cell, it seems they have things under control. They have managed a difficult prison-break, Obi-wan has turned off the tractor beam, and the road to victory looks assured. Unfortunately, the first culmination is really just the moment before everything goes wrong.

### **Key Points in Act Two**

Just as in Act One, Syd Field notes key events that become major points of the plot. In Act Two these are the [midpoint](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%201/week02/02_03_a.htm) and [plot point two](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%201/week02/02_03_a.htm).

**Midpoint**

The midpoint occurs approximately halfway through the film and is the moment at which it seems our protagonist is the furthest from the goal. Obi-Wan Kenobi's death is probably the midpoint of Star Wars. Although our heroes escape the Death Star, notice how dejected and aimless they seem. Their mentor has died, and they are now on their own against the evil Empire.

**Plot Point Two**

Plot point two is also sometimes called a reversal. It is a moment before Act Three when things shift and everything becomes uncertain. Often, at this point, our protagonist may be in a worse situation than at the beginning of the story.

The reversal before Act Three is the homing device that has been placed in the Millennium Falcon. Now the Death Star is heading for the rebel's secret base and the entire rebellion may be destroyed. What a great plot point two, and a perfect setup for the climax of the film!

## **Sub-plot**

#### [**Lord of the Rings**](https://learn.pamojaeducation.com/courses/246/module/3124/lesson/55066/content-of-acts)

Notice how similar this midpoint in Star Wars is to the midpoint of Peter Jackson's The Lord of the Rings.

In both cases, the mentor, a wise and kindly old wizard, seems to have died and the director focuses on scenes of the main characters' emotional grief, loss, and aimlessness.

## **Act Three: Resolution - 30 Minutes**

The final act of the screenplay is made up of two main elements.

First is the climax, the final confrontation between protagonist and antagonist, which leads to a resolution of the conflict.

**Climax**

Syd Field identifies the climax as a key point related to the first culmination which he calls the second culmination.

Unlike the first culmination where our protagonist's success was only a brief illusion, the second culmination is often the moment when the protagonist really is successful and the confrontation/conflict is finally resolved in their favor.

**Second Culmination**

The climax and second culmination of Star Wars occurs when the rebel pilots must destroy the Death Star before it destroys the moon of Yavin, and the rebellion. Notice there are two main objectives to be overcome in the battle.

First of all, Luke must make the impossible shot on the exhaust port. To do this, Luke must trust the supernatural advice of his mentor Obi-Wan Kenobi, and trust himself and his ability to succeed . . . not just trust machines.

R2-D2 has been hit and is dysfunctional, and Luke must turn off his targeting computer. In the end, he must trust himself.

**Denouement**

After the climax is the denouement, a short moment at the end of the film where a state of balance and calm has been achieved.

The denouement of Star Wars is the moment when Han Solo and Luke Skywalker are awarded medals by Princess Leia. Luke has been magnificently successful. More than that, in the final image we see Luke with the Princess, Han, Chewbacca, R2-D2 and C-3P0. Luke's family may have died at the hands of the Empire, but he has found a group of friends who really represent a new family for him. His emotional journey is complete.

## **Sub-plot**

#### [**Filmmakers inspire other filmmakers**](https://learn.pamojaeducation.com/courses/246/module/3124/lesson/55066/content-of-acts)

In Star Wars, the rebel award ceremony is partially inspired from director Leni Riefenstahl's The Triumph of the Will (1935).

Though this German propaganda film for the Nazi party is acknowledged as a classic work of its type, some viewers are uncomfortable with the fact it serves as a model for the Star Wars final scene.

As you proceed through the course, you will learn more about the historical and sociocultural analysis of film and the way film represents culture.

The fact that some viewers are uncomfortable that the final award ceremony has been visually designed in a way that is similar to ceremonies designed by the Nazi party, is an element of film analysis that comes from historical and cultural associations.

Acquire a copy of Star Wars (1977) to view.

In an upcoming assignment, you will submit an analysis of how Star Wars uses the Hero’s Journey for its plot structure.

This assignment will ask you determine the sections of Star Wars that relate to each of the stages of the Hero’s Journey listed below, and to write a report that explains how the evidence you have observed in that film supports your choice.

The stages of the Hero’s Journey that you will be asked to consider are:

Can you identify the following elements from the 'setup' in your viewing of the first 40 minutes of Star Wars?

#### [**Genre**](https://learn.pamojaeducation.com/courses/246/module/3124/lesson/55066/plot-point)

Genre is identified immediately in Star Wars in a number of ways.

First of all, the scrolling crawl that begins the film links it to movie serials of the 1930's and 1940's, including science fiction serials like Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers.

The first shot defines the genre further with a pan across a star field and planets, followed by the appearance of battling spaceships - all genre conventions in science fiction.

#### [**Setting**](https://learn.pamojaeducation.com/courses/246/module/3124/lesson/55066/plot-point)

The setting is developed through a fascinating series of images aboard the Princess's spaceship, and then the desert planet Tatooine with its Jawa Sandcrawlers and moisture farms.

These images convey what life is like for our characters, and also develop our understanding of Luke's feelings of isolation living on a desert world far from the centre of the universe.

#### [**Character**](https://learn.pamojaeducation.com/courses/246/module/3124/lesson/55066/plot-point)

The characters introduced within the first 20 minutes of the film include C-3PO and R2-D2, Princess Leia, Darth Vader, Grand Moff Tarkin, and finally Luke Skywalker, who will be our central character.

Though there is still much to learn about the relationships between these characters, we already understand the arc of the conflict to come.

#### [**Main Character**](https://learn.pamojaeducation.com/courses/246/module/3124/lesson/55066/plot-point)

Luke Skywalker is our main character.

He is introduced at an interesting moment about halfway through Act One.

We will come back to him in a second.

#### [**Dramatic Premise**](https://learn.pamojaeducation.com/courses/246/module/3124/lesson/55066/plot-point)

We begin to understand the dramatic premise when C-3PO says -

*“There'll be no escape for the Princess this time.”*

We learn more about the battle between the rebels and the Empire almost every time a new character is introduced.

#### [**Dramatic Situation**](https://learn.pamojaeducation.com/courses/246/module/3124/lesson/55066/plot-point)

Star Wars presents the dramatic situation in its scrolling crawl that begins the film.

## **Further Viewing**

Star Wars borrows from many films, and one of the richest sources are plot and visual ideas borrowed from Akira Kurosawa, one of the greatest Directors of the 20th Century.

If you enjoyed Star Wars and want to continue exploring the history of film, you might want to watch the following films.

**Watch -**[Seven Samurai](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0047478/)

**Watch -**[Hidden Fortress](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0051808/)

**Watch -**[Yojimbo](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0055630/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)

**Watch -**[Sanjuro](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0056443/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)

If you really enjoyed watching Star Wars**,**the Star Wars saga is continued in two sequels and three prequels and many more:

Luke's story continues in:

**Review -** [The Empire Strikes Back](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0080684/)  (1980)

**Review -**[Return of the Jedi](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0086190/)  (1983)

Darth Vader's story is revealed in:

**Review -**[The Phantom Menace](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120915/)  (1999)

**Review -**[Attack of the Clones](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0121765/)  (2002)

**Review -**[Revenge of the Sith](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0121766/)  (2005)

And many more:

**Review -** [The Clone Wars](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1185834/)(2008)

**Review -**[The Force Awakens](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2488496/) (2015)

**Review -**[The Last Jedi](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2527336/)(2017)

**Review -**[Episode IX](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2527338/) (2019)

## **Essential Skills - Thinking**

Previously you were introduced to Pamoja's Essential Skills.

Let's look at employing our Thinking skills.

Review Star Wars and identify the following elements used within 'the setup' portion of its story structure -

* Genre
* setting
* characters ( protagonist / antagonist )
* dramatic premise
* dramatic situaion
* initiating incident
* Plot Point 1

Watch the following IB student-created film -

**Watch -** [Life Just Happens](https://www.youtube.com/embed/sZQG4mHMm1k)

Identify the 'setup' within the film and discuss how it builds audience expectations -

* Identify the element of 'confrontation' within the film and discuss how it builds conflict.
* Identify the 'resolution' within the film
	+ discuss how it meets / violates audience expectations.

Collate your response to each of the items above into a PDF document for submission.

At the same time, make sure you have uploaded your document to the appropriate area in your TEXTUAL ANALYSIS ( TA ) IB Film website.

You will be graded according to the following rubric -

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Markband** | **Markband Descriptor** |
| 1 | There is a little or no understanding of how the stages of the three-act structure relates to the film under discussion. The report lacks sufficient detail. |
| 2 | There is a limited understanding of how the stages of the three-act structure relates to the film under discussion. The report lacks sufficient detail. |
| 3 | There is a satisfactory understanding of how the stages of three-act structure relates to the film under discussion. The report is detailed. |
| 4 | There is a good understanding of how the stages of the three-act structure relates to the film under discussion. The report is detailed. |
| 5 | There is an excellent understanding of how the stages of the three-act structure relates to the film under discussion. The report is detailed. |

# Three-Act Structure

Collate your responses into a PDF document for submission.

At the same time, make sure you have uploaded your document to the TEXTUAL ANALYSIS area in your IB Film Studies Portfolio Website.

**Review**- [IB Film Studies Portfolio Website](http://filmpamoja.weebly.com/)

**Note:** For all assignments, title your document in the following way -

(Title of assignment) (First name) (Initial of your second name)

For example, if your name is Sanjay Kumar, and you are submitting this assignment, Three-Act Structure, the file will be titled -

Three-Act Structure Sanjay K.