10. Making a good Script Great by Linda Seger

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"As with any other art, it is the same with scriptwriting: In the beginning there is chaos"

Background information:

"When it comes to good scriptwriting, it depends not only on the writing but also on the revision for a good script to become a great one." Linda Seger, the author of this book, states after eighteen years of experience as a script consultant and collaboration on more than 1500 scripts, over 70 films with writers, screenwriters, directors and producers. Seger runs script writing seminars worldwide and has published five books on scriptwriting, including this international bestseller "Making a Good Script Great."

The focus of Seger's work is on the revision process. As she puts it: "This book was written to investigate what "works," i.e. to take a closer look at concepts that improve a good script and to show how to write and revise quickly and efficiently and still save the magic for your last draft."

This pragmatic approach is reflected in the "checklist" of questions for the writer to ask themselves at the end of each chapter. Other very hands-on features are the many film examples and Seger's take on how to work with Syd Field's and Christopher Vogler's methods.

Seger also describes a new path in the creative process, namely when it comes to the generation of ideas. She defines it as "clustering", and we will come back to it in this analysis. But, as mentioned before, her book doesn't focus on the creation of stories. It's a very practical guide of specific writing instructions; Seger wants to help writers deal with problems in editing their work.

This is an important contribution to the overall complex of screenwriting as a craft. We often forget that the main part of the work on a script is its revision. One could go so far as to say that only when the art of revision is mastered, the creative process as such is fully realized. If one were to name two elements that make the US film and TV industry so exceptionally successful, it would undoubtedly be the process of selecting successful stories and the process of editing scripts.

Definition of drama:

"Conflict is the foundation of drama. It's the stuff-from which drama is made. (...) Conflict is the main constituent or inherent part of any dramatic form."

Structure of a drama:

Whether a Greek tragedy, a work in five acts by Shakespeare, a limited television series in four episodes or the Movie of the Week, they all share a basic structure of three acts, beginning, middle part and end - or exposition, development and dissolution, regardless which medium you are in, film, television or theater.

The individual acts of a movie usually contain a 10-15 page exposition, about 20 pages development in the first act, a 45-60 page long second act and a short third act of 20 to 35 pages. The transition between acts is achieved through an action or event that marks a turning point.

Act 1

Exposure

(Pp. 1-15)

1st Turning point

(Pp. 25-35)

Act 2

2nd turning point

(Pp. 75-90)

Climax

(about 5 pages

before the end)

Act 3

resolution

(1-5 pages before

the end)

Basic information is conveyed in the exposition (set up). The 15-minute introduction gives an idea of the structure and direction of the story, introduces the characters and condenses a situation into a logical initial plot.

The characterizing introductory image should be a multi-dimensional approach to the plot and convey a feeling for the environment, for the rhythm and style of the film and the basic theme.

Dialogue should be used sparingly in the set-up of a story. Seger calls the event that triggers the action, sets the story in motion "impetus". The exposition is complete when the impetus has resulted in the central question to which the story refers throughout its course. The further course of the first act introduces the remaining elements of the backstory, the dramatic situation and the basic motivation of the character.

The first turning point takes place after half an hour. It is supposed to steer the plot in a new direction. Often the main character is supposed to make a decision or a commitment, which requires the introduction of a new environment or a new perspective into the action.

After not less than an hour into the main plot, the second turning point causes another change of direction and thus the transition to the third act.

In addition, the second turning point should accelerate the action so that the level of tension is highest in the third act. The second turning point often consists of two steps: the "darkest moment" followed by a new impulse. The second turning point is supposed to give the story a feeling of inevitability or inner logic in hindsight and drive it towards a resolution. The finale (climax) takes place on the last five to ten pages of the script. In the climax the central question is answered and the problem is solved, all tension is released. A final resolution answers any open questions, also from all subplots.

In addition to the three acts, two other elements are helpful in structuring a script: the title sequence and the midpoint. The title sequence can be designed in different ways: A title sequence can begin and end before the start of the actual story. Titles can be displayed over a dialog-free action sequence and establish for example a dramatic situation, introduce a character or create context. Alternatively, the title sequence can also take the form of a montage or a short sequence. In the latter case, it can be a mini exposition and reinforce the impact of the upcoming full length exposition.

The midpoint, which, according to Syd Field's paradigm, represents the most significant change in direction and divides the story in two halves, is, according to Seger, an excellent means of structuring. Often the central point is a subtle moment and only a

more detailed analysis shows that the protagonist is making a decisive change in his behavior or his attitude at this moment.

Basic dramatic principles

A successful script is characterized by marketability, which ideally is based on creativity and structure. The basic idea of the story is intended to captivate the audience and bring about identification; it provides an insight into the causes, meaning and effects of events and thus makes a contribution to the understanding of the meaning of life.

Most of the time, a story expresses a personal experience or discusses a fundamental belief of the author. Both must be understandable for the audience.

The psychologist Abraham Maslow developed a seven-part hierarchy of human needs:
1. Survival
2. Security
3. Love and belonging
4. Respect and self-esteem
5. The need to know and understand
6. Beauty - in the sense of a spiritual or artistic need
7. Self-realization

The main characters' motivations should be based on one or more of these basic human needs. An emotional connection with the audience is achieved through a comprehensible need and the emotions expressed in connection with the search for a satisfaction of the need. What is at stake for the characters, i.e. the danger of their failure in the search for this satisfaction, on the other hand, determines the degree of tension experienced by the audience, as this results from an increased risk to fail or a difficult-to-reach goal.

The most powerful connection with the audience is achieved through a recognizable universal myth that underlies the story. A very popular myth is the hero story, which is about the transformation of a real character into a person with ideal character traits. Heroes' stories reflect the general experience of overcoming misfortunes and the longing to accomplish deeds whose dimensions go beyond that of the familiar everyday world.

Seger connects her take on the plot structure with Christopher Vogler's twelve stations of the hero's journey: In the exposition the hero still moves "unhero-like" in his everyday life situation until, at the first turning point, he decides to follow the call of adventure into a new, unknown world full of dangers, obstacles and enemies, but also new allies. Often the hero is at the end of his tether soon after entering this world. This is the black

moment, the hero's lowest moment, which, as a reversal, leads to the decisive action that brings the hero the treasure and initiates his return journey, on which he has to overcome obstacles for the last time until he is recognized and accepted as a hero in his old world. In addition to the hero's journey, for Seger this is also the way towards healing: A broken character is healed through her "journey".

Seger gives a brief overview of the archetypes that, according to Vogler, accompany the hero on his journey. Extending the interpretation of the wise old man as a teacher, she also mentions the nourishing and intuitive mother who, like the gatekeeper, gives the main character a helping hand. She mentions the shadow character, who represents the hero's opponent or his dark side, as well as the trickster who constantly changes his shape.

While the plot of a story should be such that it can be told in a few words, the complexity of a story should be understood from the main character's perspective. How a character deals with achieving the goal gives the story the direction. The plot as well as the main character go through the process of transformation. What is the arc of suspense for the plot is the arc of development for the character. The development arc shows the main character first discovering his need through relationships and motivations, then he defines the goal and finally he seeks the way to this goal. The motivation to start this endeavor can take place on three levels: A) an action by the main character followed by a reaction, B) the acquisition of information which concerns the main character directly, or C) a series of incidents that result to form a whole together.

According to Seger, it is unfavorable if the motivation of the main character derives entirely from his past or back story. It forces the writer to explain the motivation through a monologue or a flashback. Long exposure monologues about the past hold up the plot. In the visual medium of film, action must be in the foreground and determine the dramatic power of each scene. Flashbacks stop the action because they depict action from the past that cannot influence the immediate present, especially if they are of informative nature and not dramatic. For Seger, real motivation can only arise from the present moment: the result of a series of events occurs immediately and presently, regardless of whether the character is ready or not. The introduction of the protagonist into the action is most understandable if a crisis situation triggers her motivation.

The motivation has to be conveyed clearly and distinctly, sometimes actions and dialogue have to be repeated so that the audience can understand the motivation. Even a passive character must be motivated to act, at the latest once the story passes the midpoint. Only if the character clearly manifests that their goal is important to them will the audience develop interest in a character's goal. The character's motivation leads them to a goal and the first contact with this goal forms the climax.

Three criteria determine a goal: It is driven by an essential need (the motive), it brings the protagonist into direct contact with the antagonist (the conflict), who then tests his strength and determination (the test). Achieving the goal must require the character to undergo a transformation. The main character needs to show that they have the qualities that are needed to achieve the goal; only then will they become the protagonist of the story. "We recognize the truth of a character through their attitude and their actions in a crisis, not through their worldview." To achieve the goal, the main character must become active, even if he is passive in nature.

Each action can be broken down into the decision to act and the act itself. A crisis is the moment of revelation of the main character. The main character himself can have a revelation about himself in the moment of crisis. Motivation, action and goal give the plot direction and dynamic, but the basis of a drama is the conflict. Seger distinguishes between five types of conflict situations, all of which take place on the interpersonal level.

- The primal conflict arises because the goals of the protagonist and the antagonist are mutually exclusive. But only in the moment of the climax does the main character become aware of this fact.
- Characters who are uncertain when acting according to their goal usually struggle with an inner conflict. However, the inner conflict must be projected outwards at the latest when the climax occurs.
- A person's conflict with a group is often centered on issues such as justice, equality, and oppression. However, the given issue should always target a specific person in order not to become abstract.
- In the situational conflict the main character is confronted with death and can only escape it if he can understand and finally overcome an interpersonal conflict.
- A cosmic conflict happens between a character and a cosmic force, which should, however, also be projected onto a human being who controls this force.

As a rule, it takes the entire three acts to bring about the decisive and final transformation of the main character. Only the extraordinary nature of the situation, and the extraordinary emotional reactions which it generates, can convince the audience that the main character has undergone a development and has acquired new characteristics. Once this has been achieved, he still has to prove that he is able to influence the course of the action by means of these properties.

A movie should have a maximum of six main characters. Each character must fulfill an essential function in the story.

Seger distinguishes between four character types:

> Main character
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> Supporting character
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> Characters that add another dimension
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> Mass and weight characters

As multidimensional characters, main characters are at the center of the plot and provide the main conflict. Supporting or secondary characters help the protagonist to achieve his goal, also by confronting him with his weaknesses. Characters that give the story an additional dimension are often confidants, who reveal a new side of themselves to the main character. They can be divided in these types:

> The catalyst character
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> The balance character
>
> The representative character

The catalyst character causes an incident or represents an obstacle, which activates the protagonist and thereby transforms him. The balance character represents an alternative point of view on the subject of the movie, and the representative character embodies the complexity of an idea. The mass and weight figures emphasize the importance of a main character through their function, for example as bodyguard, secretary or fan. A character can fulfill several functions in the course of the story.

The perspective from which a story is told can be identical to that of the main character and thus promote identification with him. The perspective can also be omniscient and explain facts that are unknown to the protagonist. A topic should not be communicated in dialogue but through decisions and actions.

In addition to the dramatic turning points at the end of each act, other dramatic plot points are:

> The obstacle
>
> The complication
>
> The reversal

Obstacles bring the action to a standstill for a moment and force the character to make a new decision for a changed course of action. Too many obstacles slow down the action: and create a sense of repetition.

A complication stands in the way of the character's intention. The response which a complication triggers often forms the beginning of a new plot or subplot that propels the story to a new turning point.

A reversal, the most dramatic form of plot point, changes the direction of the story by 180 degrees, from positive to negative or vice versa. Reversals can occur on a physical or emotional level and as the first or second turning point they are the most dramatic events. The reversal gives a story a strong momentum of its own. The audience has the feeling that "fate" has intervened. This should only be used once or twice in the course of an action, otherwise the effect will flatten or the tone will lapse into the absurd.

The action-reaction scenes caused by the dynamics of a dramatic plot point form their own plot sequence with a beginning, a middle and an end, without being interrupted by a subplot. For the benefit of the flow of the story, scenes should always be integrated into a sequence. Each scene has to develop from the previous one and form a step towards the climax. Scenes should be multi-layered building blocks that give insights into a character or the topic. Contrasts in dimensions, space or time, or in type of content make scenes more interesting. By emphasizing the difference, they allow the author to show connections that may mean changes in the characters or the actions of two opposing characters. In addition to contrasts, there are other techniques to give the story homogeneity and to clarify its thematic context: namely repetitions, motifs, the implementation of conditions. A condition is a visual cue or dialogue that prepares an action or information to be revealed at a later point in time. A motif is a consistently recurring image, rhythm or sound in the film that adds complexity to the topic. It takes at least three steps or repetitions for the viewer to focus on a certain element. The repetition can occur as image, dialogue, sound, as a recurring character trait or as a combination of these elements.

Film is action, told in scenes. The climax needs to be shown not communicated in dialogue. Static scenes, too much dialogue and information have to be replaced by an action or a visual element. A dialogue-heavy scene should be replaced by distributed, smaller expositions.

A strong story needs a strong storyline and subplots that are tied together. Subplots are intended to potentiate the underlying conflict or to further reveal the main character. They drive the course of the plot of the A-story (main plot) and also steer it in a different direction, cross it, or temporarily take its place. Every subplot needs its own dramatic structure, beginning, middle and ending. The turning points of subplots placed just

before or just after a turning point in the main story ideally reinforce it. One or two subplots prevent a story from becoming too linear, with too many subplots a story becomes unstructured.

Creation of a script:

The five main components of a script, story, character, subject, visuals and dialogue, take shape at different times during the writing process. Some writers start with the character, others with the story or the subject. In order to tap into the main theme of the story, Seger advises the clustering technique. The basic idea of the script is written in one sentence in a circle, all associations are placed around it. The function of this creative technique is to recognize the relationships between the ideas, to get an overview of the boundaries of the topic and to get initial ideas for implementation. A good method of connecting ideas without yet assigning them a definite place or shape, is to work with colored index cards. They can become functional elements that promote the creative process. Seger recommends different colors of cards for each area, i.e. story, characters, subject, visuals and dialogue. The number of cards is not specified, as is the length of the notes. The creative process proceeds from chaos to order, so after a trial and error phase the writer will discover the best possible combination and then move on to a short description of all individual scenes of the story in around 50 to 100 lines in the form of a scene outline. The resulting storyline should be summarized in the form of a short story (treatment) of around 8 to 15 pages. This first summary provides an overview of the structure and reveals the inner logic of the plot, which, however, usually requires several revisions before the final version of the script. In order not to succumb to the impression of something finished, Seger recommends working with paper until the structure is in place. A treatment or scene outline serves primarily to develop the course of the story. A diary is suitable for developing characters and themes. The entries can be used to explore the inner workings; the biography, the main traits of the characters and the scope of the basic topic can be discussed. Sound recordings are also helpful in capturing dialogue ideas and checking them in spoken form.

Seger suggests using computer programs for the construction of the script. However, they only help to sort the information or to remind you of certain points that need to be considered when writing the script. The aim of all techniques is to prepare for the writing process. She recommends that you "write through" the first draft so as not to interrupt the writing process once it has started, and only then start revising it. As a rule, a script takes three to six months from the idea to the first finished draft. The closer the relationship between scenes, the clearer is the flow and focus of the story. In order to

find the beginning of a scene, its end must first be determined. Although nothing should be imposed on a story that is not inherent in it, Seger advises against being afraid to be too drastic: the second act in particular needs energy and drive for tension and a functioning momentum.

Finding the myth of one's own story is part of a writer's work. Seger recommends reading fairy tales, and Christopher Vogler's preferred sources, Joseph Campbell and C.G. Jung. However, this should not be done before the first rough draft, as the development of the myth should naturally arise from the story. The elaboration of the myth during the revision process gives the script liveliness and depth.-A myth can paralyze creativity however, if used too prematurely or as a guiding principle.

Seger puts particular emphasis on the revision process. "Not every excellent writer is necessarily a brilliant structuralist." The main part of the revision is to give the story a strong structure in order to create momentum, clarity and a focus on the essentials. A first version according to Seger usually has a good story or interesting characters but not a good structure. During the revision, an overview of the whole and consideration for the details must be maintained. The design of the acts is often unbalanced: Acts are not clearly structured, one act is stronger than the others, parts do not fit together, the end is stronger than the beginning or the second act has boring passages. A slow exposition or a first act with little action strains the patience of the audience too much. Sometimes the first turning point comes too late, causing too high a density in the second act. If the second turning point comes too early, the third act becomes too long, which weakens the tension building up towards the finale. In Seger's experience, this often results from authors confusing the midpoint and the first turning point, so that the second act does not begin until after the first half of the script. The midpoint often comes up automatically after a thorough revision. If the resolution is too long, the audience will perceive the end as unclear. Unstructured subplots that stray from the topic, are unrelated to the main plot, or mistaken for the main plot, can lead to confusion. Seger advises looking at the individual storylines separately and checking their function and dramatic structure to rearrange or revise them if necessary. The main challenge with the second act is to give 45 to 60 pages of script a good structure. Inconsequential and confusing scenes result in a less than perfect second act that weakens the overall narrative structure.

Seger advises to look at individual storylines separately and to check their function and their dramatic structure in order to rearrange or revise them if necessary. The main problem with the second act is the structural management of 45 to 60 pages. At this point the plot runs the risk of deviating from its actual narrative structure through irrelevant and/or confusing scenes. To increase the tension, action-packed sequences are often incorporated after the first half of the second act or in preparation for the second turning point. The writer has to pay attention to the inner necessity.

Action-packed scenes do not replace the plot. If sequences revolve around more than one idea, a scene selection must be made that is focused and creates clear connections. The revision is the best time to work out links. Images and topics that require a clearer drama can be replaced or adapted, specifications can be checked for their implementation. The script must be visually reconsidered and checked for originality and homogeneity. Recurring picture elements have to be identified. Every scene has to be checked for its impact on the entire story. If a screenplay is the adaptation of a novel that primarily addresses an internal conflict, the inner life of the character should find expression as a plot. Doing justice to a novel often means rebalancing subplots and main plots.

Chinatown according to the rules of Linda Seger

Linda Seger does not offer a new method, but instead a synthesis of Syd Field's and Christopher Vogler's findings. Regarding the action's structure, her approach is based on Syd Field, and in character finding on Christopher Vogler. We therefore refrain from analyzing the structure of the action, with the exception of a few examples at the end, because it would not reveal any new findings. The focus of Seger's essay is on script revision in order to develop the plot structure and character arc.

Fortunately, Syd Field describes the revision process of the script in his book in great detail, so many elements of Linda Seger;s approach can be demonstrated using Chinatown as an example.

Screenwriter Robert Towne wrote the screenplay in 1972 when the Watergate Affair shaped the zeitgeist and casted a disillusioning perspective on justice, the common good, and politics in general. Towne wanted to show that "classic" crimes like murder, robbery or rape are punished with life imprisonment, but crimes against a whole community lead to their perpetrators later acting as namesake for streets and squares or being honored in the town hall.

In the first version of the script, Robert Towne shows Noah Cross being punished for his incestuous relation with his daughter, but also that Los Angeles owes its current position as a world metropolis to the robbery of "Owens Valley", which was essentially Cross' work.

In the first version of the script, there is a significant shift in the balance of power, as the following summary of the finale shows: When, at the end of the story, Evelyn Mulwray learns that Noah Cross has hired Gittes to find her daughter / sister, she realizes that only Cross' death will prevent him from engaging in incest with his granddaughter / daughter. This motivates her to kill him herself. She asks her father to meet her in a

lonely place where she tries to run him over, but misses him. She then shoots him. Shortly afterwards, Gittes and Escobar appear on the scene. In a voice-over commentary, Gittes explains how the story ended: Evelyn Mulwray spent four years in prison for the murder of her father, Gittes managed to bring her daughter / sister back to Mexico, the property speculation brought the city of Los Angeles substantial income and contributed considerably to its boom.

This finale is still predominantly shaped by the belief that justice and order will in the end prevail. It contradicts the initial statement that the rich can get away with murder. Director Roman Polanski was instrumental in changing the ending of the second version: Gittes plans to meet Evelyn Mulwray in Chinatown to help her and her daughter / sister escape to Mexico. Cross, however manages to get him arrested for the murder of Hollis Mulwray and for the water scandal. Gittes is to drive Cross to see his daughter and granddaughter, but manages to overpower Cross when they arrive. Evelyn flees in a panic in her car and is shot dead by Escobar's men. In the final scene, Noah Cross weeps over his daughter's corpse while Gittes tells an astonished Escobar about Cross's guilt.

The third and final script version is the most unforgiving. It most clearly reflects Towne's central idea: Cross forces Gittes to reveal Evelyn's hiding place. Evelyn dies, Gittes cannot even intervene to help. Escobar does not arrest Gittes but only to avoid an even bigger scandal. Cross emerges as the clear winner: He will benefit substantially from the water scandal and will not be bothered for the murder of his daughter or Hollis Mulwray, or for his incest. This example proves Seger's right when she says that several revisions are necessary in order to adequately meet the core message of a story.

Other structurally relevant elements which Seger enumerates can be shown on the basis of Chinatown, too: Seger's demand that every form of conflict should be eked out in the form of a relationship for reasons of dramatic effectiveness is fulfilled. Gittes' internal conflict with his past in Chinatown is concretized by his reluctance to trust Evelyn. Noah Cross embodies the unscrupulous power and the injustice Gittes suffered back then. Seger's recommendation to distribute the exposition of conflicts instead of revealing the entire conflict-related circumstance in one place is implemented, too: Gittes' bitter experience from his past as a police officer in Chinatown is discussed several times, but only revealed after the love scene with Evelyn Mulwray. Although Gittes' past is complex, flashbacks, which Segers advises against, are completely dispensed with, It is not the past events themselves but Gittes' resulting flawed judgment that reveals the injury and drives the action forward.

Seger's classification of the characters, which goes beyond Vogler's classification into archetypes, can also be understood using the example of Chinatown: The main

characters are Gittes, Cross and Evelyn Mulwray. The fake Mrs. Mulwray is the catalyst character. Supporting secondary characters are the daughter Kathrin and Evelyn's servant Kahn, who is also a mass and weight character, just like Gittes' employees and Escobar's, or Cross' people.

The shepherd, who disrupts the vote on the construction of the dam in the parish hall with his herd of sheep, is a representative figure that illustrates the complexity of the topic. He stands for the little man and his sacrifice: The citizens of Los Angeles had to pay for the construction of the dam and Noah Cross' profits through their taxes and the inhabitants of the dried up valley could no longer provide for their livelihood. Based on this scene, another one of Seger's requirements is fulfilled: with the shepherd's appearance, a relatively static, information-heavy scene is upgraded, because the physical consequences of the discussed plans are clearly demonstrated.

Gittes' character also corresponds with Seger's demands on a protagonist. Gittes' inner truth is different from the creed that the rich can even get away with a murder. This radical stance reflects instead Towne's intention as the author. Gittes is at his core an idealist who, despite bitter experience, still believes in justice and has a code of honor. While the writer of the script is already disaffected, Gittes, a hopeless romantic, fights the battle against amoral power, only to be confronted in the end with the bitter truth that Towne communicates to the audience with the story.