

Conflict, Script Structure and the Imagination

Lex Williford

Conflict and Script Structure

The source of all drama—in fiction, theater and film—is conflict. Paradoxically, many writers I know think of themselves as practitioners of nonviolence, people who believe in conflict-resolution. I happen to be one of these writers. But I also know that, to resolve conflict, one must first *understand* conflict and *how* and *why* it happens. But because conflicts are complex, it takes a lifetime of study to begin to understand why they happen, and even then you're often powerless to change them. Watch *CNN* for five minutes and you know what I mean.

When I see conflicts between other people in my life, I sometimes try to resolve them, even when trying to resolve those conflicts—especially between family members and friends—is largely out of my hands and a huge risk to take. More often than not, when I get involved, I know from much experience, I risk getting caught in the middle, ending up with two black eyes, one from each person in the conflict. So I choose the conflicts I'm willing to involve myself in carefully. And I avoid conflict if more conflict is likely to result.

The problem with avoiding conflict, though, is that it often remains unresolved—sometimes for a lifetime.

To know when to become involved in conflict and how to help those having conflict is to understand the principle *sources* of conflict—*motive*, the deep, often unconscious reasons why people behave the ways they do, and *point of view*, how they see the conflicts differently. To understand conflict also requires empathy for each person in the conflict and the ability to see that conflict from both sides.

It may seem strange, then, that so many people who avoid conflict choose to become writers. Since the main job of writers is to *create* conflict and then to *increase* that conflict, it seems like a bad choice of avocations or professions—at least it feels that way to me sometimes.

But writers are often born from conflict: They grew up in families that were always fighting, or they've experienced some traumatic event—a divorce, a death, a war, a loss of a lover husband or wife or partner or friend or prestige or wealth. And after a while, writers who keep writing learn a kind of faith: that *the more pressure they put their characters under the more they'll define and deepen their characters*.

Virgil wrote the famous line,

A person's character is his (or her) fate.

The writer's belief in this equation (character = fate) depends largely upon conflict as the primary means of revealing *true* character.

We all to some degree wear the masks of "civilized" life. We're kind and generous, say, when our lives are going the way we want them to go. But when we face obstacles to our desires, the masks fall away and we change—and not often for the better.

Have you ever wondered why, when you're late and you have an important appointment, date or meeting, you always seem to catch every red light and traffic jam from your home to your destination? More important, have you ever noticed how you *change* in such moments—cursing red lights and detour signs, shouting at or making obscene gestures to other drivers, swerving in and out of lanes to speed up, only to be slowed again by a farmer driving his truck thirty miles an hour in the left lane?

Hemingway once wrote that those who remain calm and clear-headed at the highest moments of conflict possess the highest form of humanity: "Grace under pressure." Under tremendous pressure and stress, we may show this kind of grace and humanity, but it's far more likely that we'll become *less* human the more we encounter conflict. If we change at all we too often change for the *worse*.

In a sense, our jobs as writers is to give our characters an important meeting with their fates, escalating conflict that makes every traffic light on their journey to self-discovery turn red. Without conflict, self-discovery is hard to show dramatically, and screenwriting is all *show* and very little *tell*.

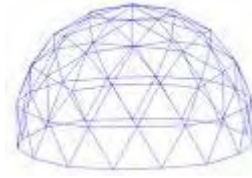
The Principal Form of Conflict

Here are a few principals that may suggest a big difference between the natural of mathematics and human nature. Mathematics is predictable, but human nature isn't—a pretty good reason why more people become accountants than writers.

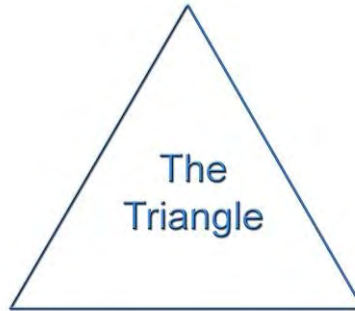
The Most Stable Form in Nature

What, according to the late, great scientist Buckminster Fuller, designer of the geodesic dome, is the most stable form in nature?

Hint: it's the principal building block of the geodesic dome:

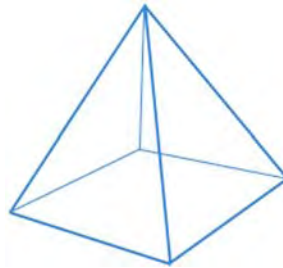


If you think it's . . .



. . . you're right.

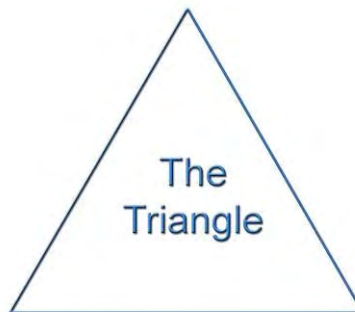
Molecules and buildings composed of triangles are often the most stable ever created, the Egyptian and Mesoamerican great pyramids lasting far longer than the civilizations which built them:



The Least Stable Form in Human Nature

What, according to many dramatists, is the *least* stable form in human nature?

Yep, you guessed right:



And since human nature is not so different from animal nature—even in dogs

such as my Shetland sheepdog—I'll illustrate a few points about triangles and dramatic structure with a story about dogs:

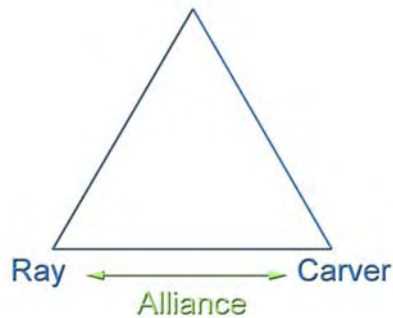
Carver and Muffy and Ray

My dog's name is Carver, after the late, great short story writer, Raymond Carver. My colleague David Ruitter, a Shakespearean scholar, has another dog, Ray, a black Lab also, coincidentally, named after Raymond Carver.¹

Often, while David's away presenting papers at conferences, he asks me to dog-sit Ray. Ray and Carver usually get along fine—until it's time to eat. They play a lot, glad to have some company, since they both come from single-dog homes. But dog (and human) nature being what it is, I have to put their food bowls on opposite sides of the kitchen and watch them closely while they eat. Ray wants Carver's food and is willing to dogfight him for it.

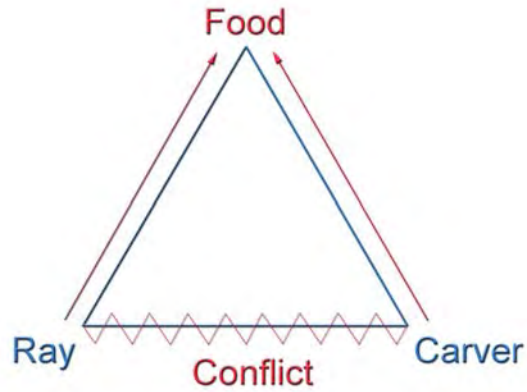
In this case, of course, the conflict is pretty simple. Two dogs want the same thing, *food*:

As long as there's no food, the dogs are allies:



But as soon as I introduce food, the alliance disappears and there's trouble:

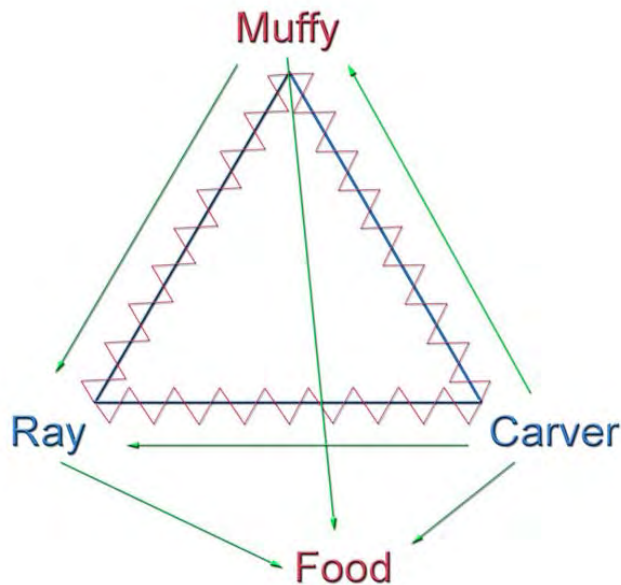
¹ Coincidence happens in real life but it doesn't work so well with drama: it creates problems of credibility. Fact is stranger than fiction because life is full of coincidences, accidents and serendipity—all of which stretch credibility in fiction and drama. If you decide to kill off one of your characters by having him run over by a train, for example, you should probably foreshadow that event. But it's probably better to have keep your main character alive since it's *his* story.



Two dogs—or two people—who know each other well usually don't have much conflict until they both want the same thing, and then things can get pretty complicated. But if the obstacle to desire is another dog—or another person—the blood can fly. Add a third dog—or person—who also wants something, for example, and things can get downright ugly.

A year ago, one of my graduate students asked me to dog-sit her poodle Muffy (the dog's real name, I swear) while I was *also* dog sitting Ray.

If I were to graph what happened when Muffy came to stay, it would look something like this (the green arrows representing which dog wanted what):



As you can see, the conflicts here become complicated *and* surprising fast:

1. Muffy wants Ray. She follows him around, tries to lick the hackles rising along his back, tries to cuddle. Yes, clearly it's love, but Ray wants nothing to do with her. Ray snaps and growls at Muffy. Muffy is sad, confused, tries to eat Carver's food. When I tell her she can't, she lies under the

- kitchen table and tucks her head under her front paws. She makes little simpering whimpers.
2. Carver wants Ray *and* Muffy—he follows them both around, well, like a puppy—but Ray and Muffy want nothing to do with Carver. Ray snaps and growls at him, tries to eat his food. Muffy snaps and growls at Carver and tries to eat his food, too. Carver is hurt, confused. He’s not hungry anymore. He walks aimlessly around the house, scuffing his back paws across the hardwood floors, his eyes bloodshot and wet. He falls to the floor, a loud thump, then gnaws on his back paw.
 3. Ray wants nothing but food, *Carver’s* food—wants nothing except to be left alone—but I make him eat his own food. The food is hard, bitter tasting, something called “Roy’s Own” which his owner bought for next to nothing at Sam’s Club, something made out of animal parts no one wants to eat, not even rats. Even the big cockroaches that scurry around my house in the middle of the night stay away from Ray’s bowl of food. And even if the food were called “Ray’s Own,” he still wouldn’t eat that crap. Ray is grouchy; he growls and snaps at me. He goes on a hunger strike. For days, he sniffs the trash, sniffs the kitchen baseboards, trying to find something other than his own food to eat, stares up at me droopy-eyed like I’m the cruelest person he’s ever known. When I find half-eaten paper plates scattered all across the kitchen floor, I put the trashcan on the stove. Ray throws up little wads of paper all over my house.

Even in a somewhat simple story of three dogs—a canine triangle unlike anything you’ll see in a Disney film—complex themes begin to emerge:

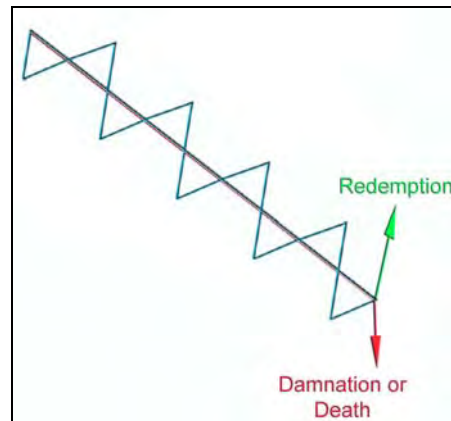
1. Unrequited love, love-sickness, depression
2. Jealousy, envy, rejection
3. Issues of sexual identity and orientation
4. Issues of inequity, a clear class structure arising among dogs, reinforced by a cruel and indifferent dog-sitter.

Many beginning writers want very much to write about such big issues, but they don’t have the slightest idea how to go about doing it. They often write long philosophical tracts about alienated twenty-year-olds very much like themselves, characters whose parents, friends and ex-girlfriends just don’t understand them.

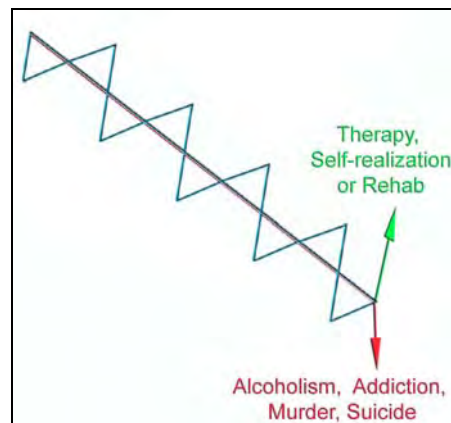
But instead of writing scenes of conflict between the parents, friends or ex-girlfriends, they write about their protagonists being unable to get out of bed, drinking too much, smoking too much dope, wandering around aimlessly in the bad part of town alone, staring up at the moon, which is supposed to symbolize something, but no one in class can figure it out. Whatever’s depressing these poor protagonists has happened off stage, and we may never understand why they’re alienated because we’ll never see the conflicts that set off their downward spiral.

Don’t get me wrong: Downward spirals make terrific material for script stories,

and they may look something like this, following the standard structure of moral tales such as fables, fairy tales and biblical parables (like “The Prodigal Son”):



Or they may look like this, a more contemporary version:



In any case, it's not that these stories aren't interesting or important. Once I find out what the story's really about—usually in conference with the student—the story usually ends up being fascinating. It's just that the writer has chosen not to *write these conflicts in scene*.

Despite what anyone says—Willa Cather wrote that there are only 12 stories, for example—not every story has been told. Because each person is an individual, one of a kind, never to be born in this particular historical time or place, with his own distinctive family and friends, his or her story is individual, and therefore completely original. The trick is to write with your own unique voice and vision and to write *in scene*—*in scenes that show conflict*.

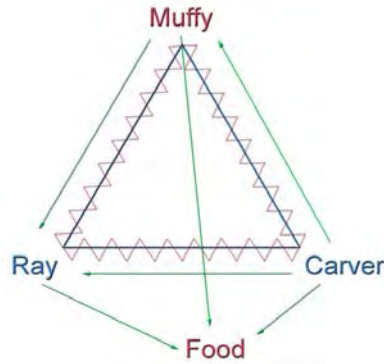
Obligatory Scenes

Another way of putting it is this:

If you were to draw a series of triangles showing all the conflicts between the

characters in the script you want to write, you'd realize that you have a certain number of *obligatory scenes*—scenes you're *required to write to show* that conflict—to make your story and your characters complex and three dimensional.

Take a look at the tragic story of Carver, Ray and Muffy again:



This diagram suggests a *minimum* number of *obligatory scenes* to fully develop the story, *at least one scene for each point of the triangle*:

1. Muffy and the food.
2. Muffy and Carver.
3. Muffy and Ray.
4. Ray and the dog food.
5. Ray and Carver.
6. Carver and the food.
7. Carver and Muffy and Ray.

And this is just the beginning—each conflict often deserves *more than one scene to show change over time*.

Why Writing Triangles Is Important

When writing screenplays, short stories, novels, plays and other dramatic forms,

1. It's difficult, almost impossible, to show internal conflict, especially if the screenplay has no other characters for the main character to be in conflict with. Put another way: it's difficult, almost impossible, to show internal conflict in a screenplay without also showing external conflict between *at least two* characters. Internal conflict is important to the development of character and story, of course, but it often takes more than one character to show, develop and deepen it. Writing about a protagonist who can't get out of bed, for example, is inherently undramatic.
2. The best way to create surprising conflicts is to create or explore dramatic *triangles* between your characters—and they don't have to be the kinds of far-fetched, superficial triangles you might see in soap operas or *telenovelas*. (John is married to Alicia, who is pregnant with Jimmy's

child, but Jimmy is really in love with John, and Jimmy's waiting for Alicia to have the child, then die of terminal brain cancer so he can share the child with John, etc. . .) Life is complicated precisely because subtle, complex triangles exist everywhere between people, just as they exist in nature, the building blocks of molecules that make up the world and the people who live in it.

3. The best way to dramatize the triangles between characters is to identify each point of conflict and to write *at least one obligatory scene* that shows each conflict. (Keep this in mind later when I ask you to buy a box of 3 x 5 cards.)

The principal building blocks of drama, then, are the triangle and the scenes one must write to show how each triangle works.

More important, *each triangle must turn*. That is, each scene written about each point of conflict in the triangle must show change—a subtle change or, better yet, a *complete reversal from one state to its opposite*.

So far, I've used triangles to illustrate the lines of conflicts between characters; now I'll use triangles to illustrate *turns* or *reversals* in linear and nonlinear scripts.

Linear Script Structure, Reversals and the Building Blocks of Drama

The standard Hollywood script is linear, the choice of most studio producers and standard movie viewers (especially if it has a happy ending). A linear script follows a fairly strict chronological order—*This happens; then this happens* in a kind of causal chain: *This happens because this happens*—scenes that show a dramatic development of character change or the *arch of character*.

Just because a linear structure can become predictable—especially when it uses car chases and automatic weapons and big flashy explosions and special effects, action rather than drama, superficial plot points rather than character development—doesn't mean that linear structure is an inherently *bad* or *inferior* form. In fact, I'd argue, a strong linear script story, especially one that's surprising and original, *is perhaps the most difficult script story to write*.

Just as Picasso learned to draw spectacularly well *before* he began his grand experiments with form, most screenwriters must begin with linear structure before they can begin experimenting with nonlinear forms. It's best to know the so-called "rules" of a form before you begin breaking them—and breaking the rules, pushing boundaries, is ultimately what you want to do as a scriptwriter. The authors of *Alternative Scriptwriting* put it this way: "You have to know everything about structure in order to move beyond it. It isn't possible to reinvent the process without knowing it in detail."²

² I highly recommend *Alternative Scriptwriting: Successfully Breaking the Rules*, by Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush (Focal Press) if you want to learn more about using nonlinear structure and pushing the boundaries of form.

There are many nonlinear scripts that have been popular—*Pulp Fiction*, *Amores Perros*, *Crash*, *Magnolia* and *Memento*, to give a few recent examples—but nonlinear scripts aren't necessarily *better* than linear scripts, even though working against traditional linear form is common among independent and foreign filmmakers and scriptwriters rebelling against the traditional order, and many of these nonlinear script forms are quite successful. (More about all this later in the section on Nonlinear and Modular Script Structure.)

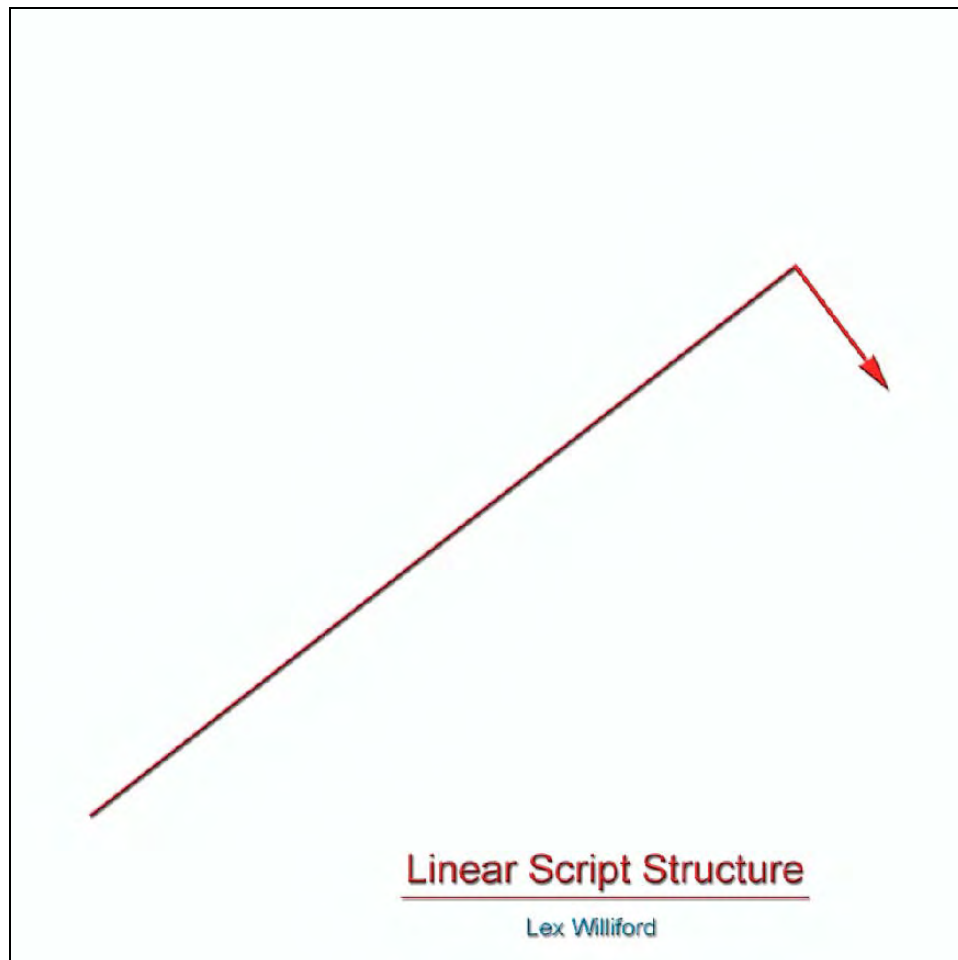
The best scripts (linear and nonlinear scripts) many would agree, are those in which a character at the beginning of a script is *utterly changed* by the end. The change is not just a minor change but a complete *reversal*, a *change to an opposite state*. After all, a character who doesn't change is inherently uninteresting, unless the reversal occurs in the person who's reading the script or watching the film sees the tragedy and realizes: *This jerk isn't going to change*. That's his tragic flaw, and the story is about his *inability to change*. The reversal occurs within the *audience* and not within the character.³

Basic Linear Script Structure almost always shows a complete reversal in character. Something happens to a character—the inciting incident—which along with escalating conflicts and reversals over the course of the script story, forces the character to undergo a complete change from one state to its opposite, from denial to understanding, from blindness to sight and so on. Or the reversal itself is reversed, creating even greater irony, as in the ancient story of Oedipus, who blinds himself the moment he sees the truth—the truth being too terrible to bear.

Linear Script Structure and The Inverted Checkmark

The standard inverted checkmark you've seen in almost every creative writing class you've ever taken, based upon Freitag's Pyramid (like a flipped version of downward spiral on pages 6 and 7), probably looks something like this:

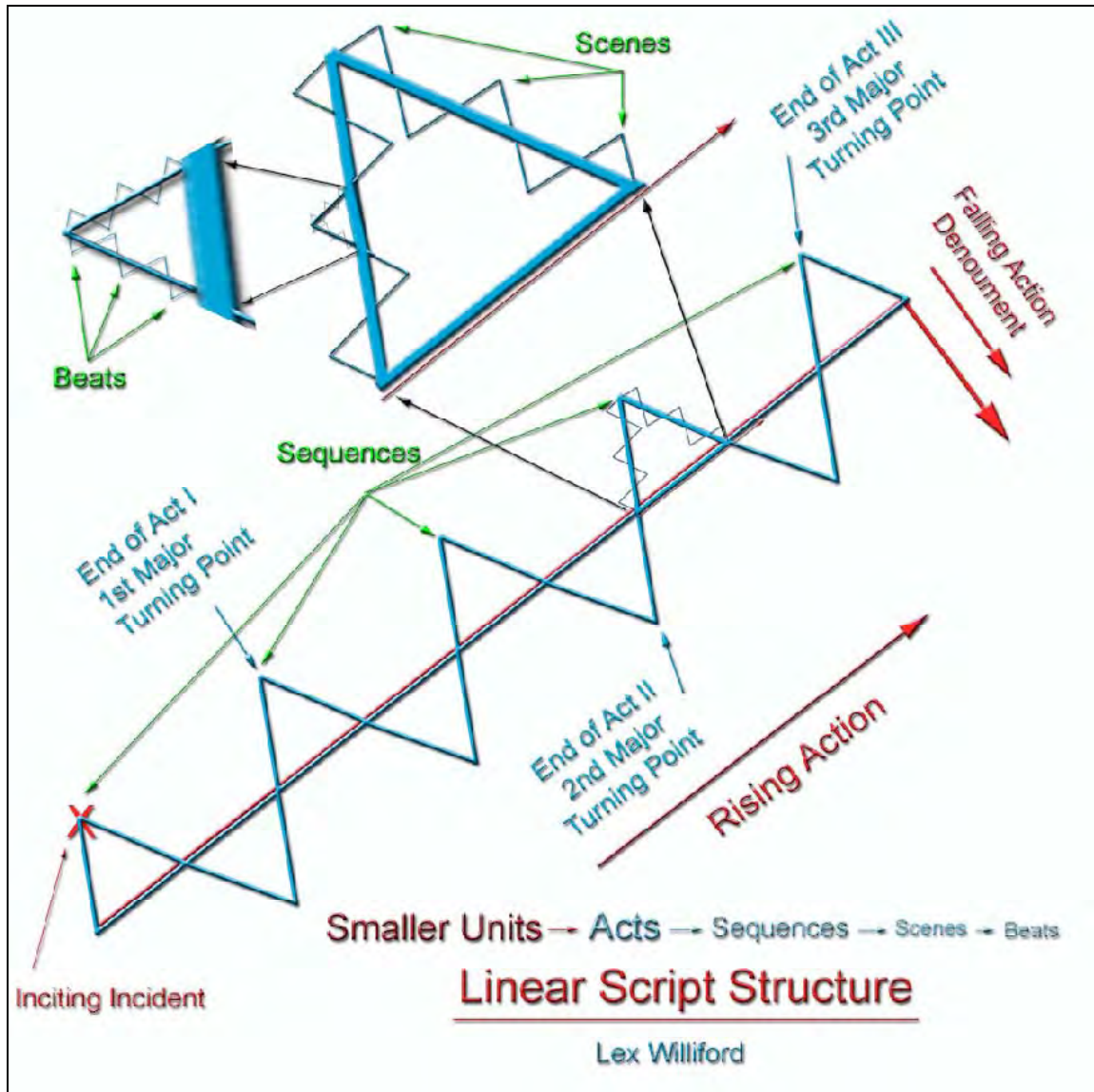
³ Almost all Tom Crews movies follow the *Jerk-to-Nice-Guy* character arch: Think of *Top Gun*, *A Few Good Men*, *Rain Man*, *Magnolia* or more recently *War of the Worlds*, and you get the picture. It's a predictable form for him, but it's made him richer than god and the brunt of late night talk show hosts. He jumps up and down on Oprah's couch and world takes notice.



This diagram, composed of all the standard dramatic elements you've heard of a thousand times—Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action (or Denouement)—isn't particularly helpful, I know, because it's abstract and not, well, very dramatic.

Here's another, more complex diagram I've created below, composed of many elements you may already be familiar with and many smaller dramatic elements that you may be less familiar with⁴:

⁴ You'll find a more complete description of these dramatic elements in Chapter 8 of *Screenplay: Writing the Picture*.



These dramatic elements are all based upon what, for the sake of simplicity, I'll call a **dramatic turn, or reversal**, and each **turn** or **turning point** occurs in larger and larger dramatic units:

1. The standard feature-length linear **Script** (90-120 pages) is often composed of three or more
 - a. **Acts**, which are also composed of many
 - i. **Sequences**, which are also composed of many
 1. **Scenes**, which in turn are composed of many
 - a. **Beats**, small **turns** or **turning points** within a scene.

The word **Beat**⁵ is perhaps the most confusing term listed above but also

⁵ The term **beat** is confusing mainly because it's based upon a misunderstanding of something

perhaps the most important of all these terms, the basic building block of all reversals and turns, large or small. For the purpose of this class, I'll simply use the word **turn** or **reversal** instead of **beat**. Either word is more accurate and a little easier to understand.

*A **turn** or **reversal** should occur at almost every level of a script* if the writer wishes her script to be compelling, surprising and dramatic, something a producer is willing to spend millions of dollars to make.

If you can learn to write the smaller turns or reversals, you can write the larger turns. Writing strong beats and scenes is the principal skill you must learn as a beginning scriptwriter, and writing strong scenes remains the most difficult of all skills, even for experienced scriptwriters. It never gets any easier, I know from experience, because each story, each scene, is new, presenting its own problems of technique.

Turns and Reversals

The simplest way to describe a **turn** or **reversal** is this: Something happens that surprises your audience, beat by beat, scene by scene, sequence by sequence, act by act. If you don't surprise yourself, then you're probably not going to surprise your audience.

Film viewers, even children, are incredibly sophisticated and, having seen thousands of films—many of them predictable and not particularly good—they have incredibly sophisticated expectations. Above all, they want *to be surprised*. They've spent eight bucks or more to see your film, and they want to learn something new, want to see something they've never seen before, to understand a little more about why people act in the strange and surprising ways they do. Yes, they want to say, that character did that terrible or amazing thing and it's exactly what that character would have done.

Like it or not, your audience is always one step ahead of you. If a character in your script is a stereotype or does something predictable, your audience is already bored, wishing they'd gone to another movie in the multiplex. But if you *get a character into trouble and make it worse and worse*, your audience will stay with you all the way.

The best way to create a turn is to create an obstacle to a character's desire. For example, there's nothing more interesting than one character telling another character *no*. Anything desirable and worth having takes hard work and dogged persistence, and if you have characters who are always saying *yes* to each other,

Konstantin Stanislavski, a Russian actor and director told an American actor: "Thees is just a leetle dramatic beet." The word he meant was *bit*, but the actor misunderstood it as *beat* and every dramatist since has had to explain the misunderstanding to baffled students. The term is also confusing because scriptwriters sometimes use the parenthetical (**beat**) in dialogue to show a dramatic pause or moment of silence, a completely different use of the word altogether.

saying how much they love each other, for example, chances are you're not going to have much conflict. No story.

The number-one turn in a script is a *no* when a character wants *yes*—or when a character gets what she wants and realizes it was a really bad idea: *Be careful what you wish for.*

Turns and reversals can come in countless different forms:

1. Reversals in Character:

- a. A character does something baffling and surprising that *seems* completely out of character until we realize that action is inevitable.⁶
- b. A character is forced to see something about herself she's been unable to see, perhaps even refused to see, and must change or die—physically or spiritually.

2. Reversals in Situation:

- a. A character with everything suddenly loses it all: his family, her beauty, his wealth, her prestige, his health, and so on, because of something he did or didn't do, or something completely beyond her control.
- b. A character who believes in something—duty, God, country, his wife, his best friend, his parents, his children—suddenly loses faith in one or all.

3. Reversals in Audience Expectation:

- a. The guy *doesn't* get the girl; the girl *doesn't* get the guy.
- b. The bad guy in the black hat turns out to be the good guy or vice versa.
- c. A character doesn't get what she wants, but she's happy.
- d. A character gets what he wants, but he's miserable.

The variations are limitless. The point to keep in mind is this: the more surprising each turn—beat by beat, scene by scene, sequence by sequence, act by act—the more you'll surprise *yourself*. And if you've surprised yourself, you've probably surprised your audience, too.

The point here is this: Don't become too attached to an outcome in your script that may change *as you write the script*, especially an ending that's too predictable or easy.

I can't count the number of times I've written toward a certain ending and then realized I was wrong. Then I had to rethink and rewrite my story so that then ending surprised me and seemed inevitable. As my characters have become

⁶ Think of the girl or guy who dumped you in 7th grade. You were surprised, hurt, but then you remembered that time he said this or did that, and then it all added up. That's exactly what he or she would have done; you just didn't see it, didn't *want* to see it, blinded by naïve love or teenage lust.

more real, more complex and interesting, they've deserved better than the ending I cooked up for them at the beginning.

The discovery, the surprise: these are the reasons we write.

The Script as an Exploration of Motive

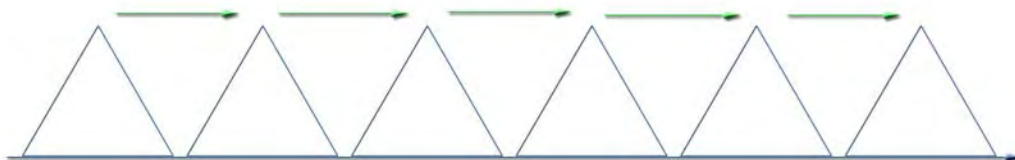
For many writers, the obsession to write comes not from a desire to be famous or rich (both very unlikely for scriptwriters) but from a desire to understand why. Why does this character do this terrible thing? Why does this character choose that character to spend her life with? Why does one character risk everything to get something she wants? Why does another character betray someone he loves? Why do people love at all? Why do they hate, willing to blow up a building full of innocent people whom they don't even know in the name of some god or country or idea?

You may not know what the larger questions of motive are until your characters stop being your characters and start becoming themselves. There no greater satisfaction—and frustration—a writer can experience, for example, than finding out that her character has been lying to her for seventy pages. But this is why most writers I know write. They don't write because they already know why. They write because they *don't* know, perhaps *don't want* to know, because the truth about their characters is sometimes just too terrible to bear. For this reason, writing more often than not takes a certain kind of courage: The willingness to look at the truth without flinching and say what it is in all its beauty and terror.

Writing a script, then, is about discovery, taking a journey that you think will take you in one direction but instead takes you another. And if your characters are complex enough—involved in many complex triangles with other complex characters—they'll surprise you and everyone who reads about them or sees them on the big screen (or at the local Blockbuster).

Nonlinear or Modular Script Structure

Linear script structure follows a *fairly strict chronological order* (often with few flashbacks), one scene or reversal *causing* the next that follows and so on . . .



Chinatown follows a standard linear and chronological order—no flashbacks, one scene following causally after the next.

A woman pretending to be Mrs. Mulwray lies to Jake, asks him to investigate Mr. Mulwray, whom she thinks is having an affair → Jake tries to find out who the girl is and why → Someone murders Mr. Mulwray → Jake tries to find out why → The real Mrs. Mulwray lies to Jake → Jake tries to find out why. And so on.

Nonlinear or modular script structure often follows an intuitive or poetic order based on clusters of similar images, scenes or themes, like puzzle pieces or parts of a collage that fit together out of a clear logical or chronological sequence:



Everything Is Illuminated is a fairly good recent example of a script that—while it's mostly linear, a road trip of discovery in Ukraine—follows a nonlinear or modular order. The main character, Jonathan Safran Foer, collects things from his Jewish family, trying to understand why his grandfather was saved by a mysterious woman in an old photograph and somehow escaped the Holocaust that killed everyone in his village. Foer is obsessed, and he wants to go back to Ukraine to find the woman who saved his grandfather's life—and his own.

One of the objects Foer keeps is a locket with a huge amber amulet which has a prehistoric grasshopper frozen inside. At different points in the script, the image of grasshoppers reappears—most prominently when the main character finds the woman who saved his grandfather living in a house surrounded in a field of sunflowers—and each of these images moves us into a flashback or reverie by the main character. So the connection between scenes isn't causal or linear order but is triggered by poetic, nonlinear image clusters.

Scripts with a strictly nonlinear or modular structure are usually rare—and for many film viewers confusing—but many scripts use both methods of organization. To some extent, too, these two kinds of structure mirror different kinds of writing processes, which I'll discuss next.

While you may want to set out to defy standard script structure—to write the next *Pulp Fiction*—there's every likelihood that you'll have to organize the script into a linear order before you can shuffle the scenes in a way that work.

In fact, many writers discover that they *write their scripts out of sequence*, each

scene coming to them in a seemingly random order. This seeming randomness is in fact how the imagination often works: It is *nonlinear*. One thing makes you think of another thing, and so on, in your process of discovery.

Workshops, Scriptwriting and the Imagination⁷

In my workshops, I usually focus on three main things: 1. *Writing Process*, 2. *Craft Consciousness* and 3. *Narrative Structure*. As writer Madison Smartt Bell argues, though, each of these writing skills can often be *in conflict with* each other, requiring the training of three very different parts of the creative mind and a sense of balance between the three. For the sake of this discussion, I'll call these: *Generating Mind*, *Editing Mind* and *Sequencing Mind*.

Over the years, I've learned that if I teach any of these three things without some sense of balance—putting too much emphasis on *craft consciousness* at the expense of *writing process*, for example—my classes lose their balance, and my students become blocked, stuck. Because of workshops' "inherent tendencies . . . to enforce conformity, *no matter who is leading them*" (7), Bell writes, the "whole paradigm" of writing workshops "is a recipe for writer's block" (9). "Consciousness," he writes, "is the great inhibitor" (21).

The last thing I want to do is to make writing harder for my students than it already is. The trick, I've learned after too much trial and error, is in trying to help students become more conscious of craft and narrative structure without also making them so self-conscious that they get stuck or stop writing altogether. At times, it's a difficult, almost impossible balance to strike.

A few years ago, novelist and short-story writer Richard Bausch told me a story: In the first writing workshop he ever attended as a young man, he submitted the first two chapters of a novel he'd been working on feverishly for months. In the short span of an hour, the class and workshop director had dismissed his work, for whatever petty reasons, as a "mess," amateurish and without merit, and Bausch left the workshop and never came back, left the writing program altogether and never worked on the novel again.

Of course, Bausch kept on writing anyway and has since become one of the greatest living writers of the contemporary American short story and novel—and, I hear, he's an excellent workshop director, especially for that difficult-to-teach class known as The Novel Workshop. Even so, ever since Bausch told me this story, I've been haunted by a question: How many potentially gifted writers in writing programs have done the same thing as Bausch did, however briefly, giving up on their writing and never returning to it again, never overcoming the sometimes-petty comments of a workshop that focuses only on craft without

⁷ The following section is adapted from my recent online essay, "Generating Mind, Editing Mind, Sequencing Mind in Linear and Modular Design" (<http://www.mid.muohio.edu/segue/current.htm>).

regard to the mystery, joy and spontaneous playfulness of writing alone, for its own sake alone, in one's own sacred space?

"The great defect of craft-driven [writing] programs," Bell writes, "is that they ignore the writer's inner process" (9), a process which, Bell insists, in a seemingly impossible contradiction, "should in fact remain private" (10). Why then, despite all the faults of writing workshops, do we still submit our work—moving it from the private, playful, even sacred space of the imagination and dream to the public sphere of critical analysis? The reason is simple, and no less true for beginning writers than for writers who've had many publications and successes: To save ourselves time and trouble when we can't see our work clearly.

Simply put, we need some *narrative distance*, some *other* person's point of view—even if that person isn't trained as a writer—to help us see the underlying patterns we've laid down from writing processes that have often remained hidden from us, deeply unconscious and even mysterious. The more a writing workshop or writing program trains our critical sensibilities, the theory goes, the better we can see, explore and develop for ourselves the underlying patterns of our own work with a clearer sense of order and artistic symmetry.

More important, perhaps, we all need to *save time*, and workshops can help us see the unconscious patterns in our work *sooner*, may even show us patterns that we may never have recognized until many years later, when we're old and allegedly wiser. The whole workshop process, then, is a trade-off, especially if we can't or won't see our own unconscious patterns until we're ready, and for some of us that may be later rather than sooner than workshops, with their sometimes brute-seeming methods, will allow.

The Importance of Playfulness in Discovering Narrative Structure and The Dual Roles of the Creative Mind

When children play in their rooms, they aren't conscious of the patterns of stories they're enacting or the unconscious working out of their own unresolved inner conflicts: the dramatic love triangle between Barbie, Skipper and Ken; G. I. Joe and Spiderman's unending battle with Darth Vader and the Transformers. They only know they're *lost* in time and *having* a good time—like writers when the writing is going well, when they write for hours on end until they stop, realizing it's three in the morning and the dog has been scratching at the back door for hours to go outside and pee.

When parents open their children's doors, intruding upon their play-spaces and stories, saying, "How many times do I have to tell you to clean up your room!" these parents see only chaos—things out of place—not recognizing that the tangle of half-naked dolls in suggestive embraces or the dismembered superhero parts scattered all across the bedroom carpet all represent a kind of order, parts of complex narratives their children use to understand the chaos of their own world and the baffling contradictions of adults like their parents. Parents only

know that they want order, *now*, everything in its proper place, and they have their own ideas about what that order *should* be—like workshop directors and students who think the stories or scripts they’re critiquing should only be in strict chronological order, no flashbacks, no digressions about dogs needing to pee, please.

Children often live in *Generating Mind*, spending most of their waking (and dreaming) hours spinning out fantastical stories that surprise, disturb, amaze, frustrate and terrify their parents. Children, being unconscious most of the time, are natural storytellers in this respect, and that lack of self-consciousness often makes their stories both strange and magical.

Parents, especially controlling and unimaginative parents who’ve lost touch with their own sense of playfulness, often live in *Editing Mind* and *Sequencing Mind*, so distracted by the chaos in their lives, the concerns of making a living and paying bills, that they want *order* now, dismissing their children’s stories as the products of over-active imaginations, fabrications or outright lies, discouraging the free-flow of their children’s imaginations whether they mean to or not.

A bumper sticker I saw once at an artists’ colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, sums up the problem here nicely: “Those who have given up their dreams will discourage you in your own.” Amen to that.

The conflict between children and parents reflects in subtle ways the inner conflicts of writers who generate scenes and stories *before* they craft and sequence them. For some writers, there’s no conflict at all: they simply write linear stories and don’t think about it, period, *or* they make use of modular constructions—like collages—and don’t care if events, scenes (or digressions about dogs needing to pee) follow any particular order except that they *seem* to fit together unconsciously to them at the time.

I envy writers who can do either and feel no conflict at all.

Like many writers I know, I don’t write strictly linear narratives. Traditional narratives, Madison Smartt Bell writes, are, “timebound and sequential” (29), “the time vector run[ning] out of the past toward the future [and] follow[ing] it in a sequence of causes and effects, like a string of dominoes falling” (30).

Perhaps because I began my career as a short-story writer, I often write linear *scenes*, but I tend to write different scenes *out of sequence*, in a *modular* order, “something like a jumble of unsnapped Legos” (213) as Bell puts it. In the case of modular design, Bell writes, “the job of the artist” is “to assemble the work out of small component parts” like a “mosaicist, assembling fragments of glass and tile to form what can be understood, at a greater distance, as a coherent, shapely image” (213).

When I taught at the University of Alabama in the nineties, I often heard the story

of a recent graduate, Tony Earley, and how he composed his story, “The Prophet from Jupiter.” Earley had written three *different* stories all with the same intersecting characters, yet none of the stories *worked* as independent stories for him *or* for the other students who critiqued his stories in workshop. Earley wanted them all to be part of *one* story, he told his workshop director, but he couldn’t figure out how to put them all together to make a coherent whole.

One night late, after being stuck for months, the story goes, Earley woke up in a sudden Eureka moment and got out some old dull scissors and began cutting up his three stories, sentence by sentence, arranging one sentence from one story with another sentence from another story in paragraphs, on and on in sequence, like a giant jigsaw puzzle, until he’d finished around dawn, a huge mosaic of sentences covering his living room’s hard-wood floor like Fifth Avenue after a ticker-tape parade. He rewrote this jumble of scraps somehow, and somehow, miraculously, the three stories suddenly became one, greater than the sum of their parts, a brilliant, widely anthologized story.

To some degree all writers move back and forth between linear and modular designs. They have to generate material, then organize, sequence and craft it all into a coherent whole and in doing so have to find a balance between the child who plays in his room and the parent who helps clean up the awful mess. It’s a natural balance but one that takes persistence and patience, allowing the child to play and the parent to clean up the mess only at the right moments, the unconscious and conscious functions clearly accepting their roles and knowing when it’s time to butt out.

For the linear designer of stories, the primary tools of coherence are chronological time and cause and effect; for the modular designer, the primary tools are image clusters and repeating patterns of meaningful similarity that aren’t at times consciously recognized until long after the writing is done. Both methods of narrative design can work well, and most writers do both, whether they like to admit it or not.

A Few of The Difficulties You’ll Encounter with this Screenwriting Course

This course is designed so that you can imagine the *entire* shape of your script story *first*, then enlarge, develop and change it as you discover more about your story and characters, as you begin to sharpen the focus of the details and write dramatic scenes.

Just as you found it frustrating to outline an essay *before* you wrote it in your sixth grade language arts class, you’ll probably find it difficult to come up with a basic shape of your story up front.⁸ But try your best, and remember: If your

⁸ If you’re like me in Mrs. Jeffrey’s sixth grade class, you probably wrote your essay *first*, then wrote the outline. Most writers I know don’t know what they’re going to write *until they’ve written it*, and that’s a perfectly reasonable way to approach writing your script. In fact, it’s better to write when you *don’t* know what’s going to happen, even if it’s a little scary. Fear is a great motivator.

story's going to improve, *it's probably got to change*. (A lot.)

Also remember: I don't expect you to write the story you first came up with. In fact, *I expect your story to change as you deepen the storyline and characters*. In other words, don't be surprised if the story you set out to write becomes something else altogether.

You have to begin with something, and the purpose of writing **The Pitch**, **The Scenogram** and **The Treatment** early in the semester is to *help you discover and then deepen your story and characters* as you write, so that when it's time to write your script, you already have a well-discussed and brainstormed plan that may save you countless hours of rewriting. Of course, the original idea you come up with may not work for you, and if that's the case, just begin another until you've discovered a story that you feel compelled to write, that you'll *enjoy* writing.

Notes for The Linear Script Writer

If you're a linear thinker—a natural story teller with a logical and chronological sense of story and plot—or if you're a writer who tends to write *your entire story from beginning to end* very quickly without editing, I recommend that you do just that. Write the story and don't think about it too much. (Science-fiction writer Ray Bradbury used to keep a note posted over his desk that said, *Don't Think*.) We'll discuss your draft in workshop, but it's best to get the draft written without being too self-conscious about it. In fact, I recommend that *all the students in this class try to write the early drafts of their stories from beginning to end*, especially in the early assignments leading up to and including the Treatment.

Understand, too, that I expect you to *proofread these documents when you're done*, making sure they're as readable and clear as they can be *before* you turn them in for workshop discussion. Let your inner parent clean up your inner child's mess as much as possible. It's not my job or the job of anyone in this workshop, though I'm sure we'll help.

For The Modular Script Writer

If you're a nonlinear thinker who writes intuitively, more like a poet than a novel writer—that is, if your story tends to come to you out of sequence—then write it that way. Don't worry about the order of the scenes you need to write; just write the scenes as they come to you, even if they seem random, a complete mishmash as you write.

The unconscious mind seeks order even if it isn't readily obvious and you may have an unconscious order in mind that's not clear to you yet; perhaps the class can help you discover that structure. We'll do our best. In the meantime, write about something that obsesses you—a character or an image or a bizarre, surprising situation—and just have faith that writing the first scene will make you

think of the next scene and the next, and keep writing as many scenes as you can as quickly as you can. Let the unconscious mind do its work first. Let the kid play and make a big mess. We'll help you clean it all up later.

The main thing to keep in mind is this: No one's writing process is better than another's, and everyone's writing process is different. Use this as an opportunity to discover the writing process which works best for you, and trust it. Most writers use a combination of methods, especially as their stories begin to take on momentum. Do whatever works for you.

Visualizing Your Story

Because I began as a visual artist, I often *draw* my story before I write it. (The drawings mean nothing to anyone else, but they mean a lot to me.) Sometimes I also brainstorm or cluster or write in my journal; then, if I'm confused about sequencing, I outline what I want to do, always keeping in mind that an outline is only a map, nothing more, and that *I don't have to stick with a map that doesn't take me where I really want to go*. If it turns out I think I'm going to Vegas at the beginning of my trip, but I end up in a desert reservation where soldiers hunkered down in trenches when the first hydrogen bomb went off, that's because my story is leading me and not the other way around, and I trust that it's true to my own deep urgings, instincts and obsessions. I'm on the right track even though I don't know where I'm going, quite yet. E. L. Doctorow has a lovely metaphor for writing a novel that applies to writing scripts: "Writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way."

When I'm just beginning a new story, I often carry around 3 x 5 cards in my back pocket to jot down ideas and scenes. If I don't write them down immediately, I'll lose them.

If you want to get a quick start this semester, buy a box of 3 x 5 cards and carry them around with you everywhere. Read Chapter 9 of *Screenplay: Writing the Picture* the first week or two of class and begin writing all the scenes you can think of that might go into your script. You may end up throwing half of these out, but you'll already be doing what you need to do to write a strong script: *writing scenes that show conflict*. Get started and keep going. Writing your first script can be a lot of fun.

If you'd like to read more my writing process or about my workshopping methods feel free to go online and read these articles at www.lexwilliford.com/essays:

1. "Toward a More Open, Democratic Workshop," *Poets & Writers*, 26: 2 (March/April, 1998), 52-54, 56, 60, 62, 67, 69, 73, 75, 77.
2. "The 'Last' Draft," *Novel and Short Story Writers' Market*, 2002, 42-45.