

STORY CLIMAX

**How to Avoid Disappointed Audiences
and Craft a Screenplay or Novel Climax
Which THRILLS & DELIGHTS**



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Story Structure Made Simple

Introduction

Picture this:

A reader is browsing for books (online, at a brick-and-mortar store, it doesn't matter).

He spots your novel on the shelf, and—boom!—he instantly puts it into his shopping basket.

No hesitation.

The other books competing for his attention (even if they're less expensive) don't stand a chance.

You have achieved the Holy Grail of authorship: this reader was so impressed by your last book that you're now on his "auto-buy" list.

Let's try a different scenario:

You're in your pajamas, putting the finishing touches on the rough draft of your spec script.

Suddenly, the phone rings.

It's a producer. He's developing a big-budget film. Everything's great—up until the third act. Then, the whole story falls apart.

He wants *you* to come in and salvage the script. And he'll pay you a nice sum of money to do so too.

These don't have to remain idle fantasies.

They can become reality.

You can be an auto-buy for thousands of readers.

You can be on Hollywood's speed dial.

But, to accomplish these goals, you have to possess a very special skill.

You have to be like Harvey Specter on the TV show SUITS.

You have to be “a closer,” the kind of writer whom readers and studios can count on **to deliver an ending which isn’t merely satisfactory, but instead, deeply satisfying.**

In short, an ending which thrills and delights.

In a perfect world, your screenplay or novel would dazzle from start to finish. The beginning, middle, and end—all would be gripping.

Practically speaking, however, this is rarely the case. Most of the time, stories are a blend of strengths and weaknesses. As long as its strengths outweigh its weaknesses, a screenplay or novel can still enjoy success.

But not all weaknesses are created equal.

See, the ending of your story has an additional burden to bear, one which the beginning and middle don’t.

The ending is audiences’ last and final experience with your film or novel. Their memories of it are the ones which stick out in their minds.

Consequently, *these* are the memories they rely on most when making their final evaluations of your story.

So, if the beginning and middle of your story are “average,” (but decent enough to get audiences to stay around for the end), and the end itself is a jaw-dropping showstopper, then they can still respond with passion and positivity towards your screenplay or novel.

That’s because, when audiences leave the movie theater or turn the last page of a book, they’re more likely to remember their satisfaction with its spectacular ending than their ambivalence towards its “ho-hum” origins.

In other words, an amazing ending can salvage a story which would otherwise be considered average.

Yet, the reverse isn't true.

Even if audiences are impressed by a dazzling beginning and middle, both of which are loaded with unpredictable twists and turns, any delight audiences experience will evaporate as they sit through the lackluster finale which follows.

Basically, in this scenario, you've built up audience expectations, made them feel like they were in for a really good ride...only to dash their hopes at the last second.

You let them down.

Big time.

This offense is a lot less forgivable than starting off slowly, only to pull off a miracle and astound audiences at the end.

In sum, audience disappointment is going to be more intense after experiencing a mediocre end than a mediocre middle (or beginning).

That's why being a closer is such a valuable skill. With a spectacular ending, you've got a decent shot at success.

Without one, you have the equivalent of a contract—filled with concessions in your favor—which remains unsigned.

You've got nothing.

So, how do you avoid a mediocre ending?

How do you craft a story climax which is deeply satisfying, not merely satisfactory?

How do you become a closer?

As a starting point, you have to make good on your promises and pay off the narrative debts you've accrued from the beginning and middle of your story.

Just like there are different ways to pay off financial obligations, there are

different ways to pay off narrative debts.

To continue with our financial analogy, ideally, you'd pay off your narrative debts with cold hard cash.

But, it's not always easy to determine if you've paid off your debts with genuine dollars (or whatever currency you trade in).

Sometimes, it may appear that you have...perhaps, through an action sequence filled with daredevilry, or with romantic declarations of love which finally unite your hero and heroine.

Nonetheless, a few minor details—which may take up less than four lines of description or dialogue—mar the effect. Instead of truly paying off your narrative debts, you've fulfilled your storytelling obligations with counterfeit tender.

Sometimes, you may've even missed the mark so completely, it may seem like you've tried to pass off Monopoly money as the real deal.

Either way, while you may believe that you've paid off your narrative debts, you haven't. Accordingly, your ending will—like counterfeit or play money—fail to satisfy.

It will feel disappointing and commonplace.

In a word: anticlimactic.

That's not what you want, is it?

Of course not.

You want to pay off your narrative debts for real.

Well, in point of fact, that statement isn't entirely accurate because you want to do *more* than that. To craft an ending which really thrills and delights, you need to pay off your narrative debts—and then some.

To take our financial analogy a step further, you want audiences to feel that you've deposited a “surplus” into their pockets. You entertained them to a

degree beyond their expectations (which were fairly high to start with).

That's what it means to be a closer.

And that's what this writing skills guide is all about. It's filled with practical tips to help you achieve this coveted status.

Specifically, we'll cover:

How to Use 4 Categories of Antagonists and 8 Rules of Engagement to Build Your Story Climax on a Sturdy Foundation

The climax is the decisive encounter which resolves the conflict between your protagonist and the antagonists who've thwarted him every step of the way.

Hence, its power will depend upon scenes which occur (and decisions you've made) long before the climax actually begins.

Follow the guidelines discussed here, and you'll avoid constructing your climax on quicksand...

2 Criteria at the Core of the Climax Which Are Crucial to Fulfill to Avoid Disappointed Audiences (But Which, Oddly, Are Often Overlooked)

After you've built a sturdy foundation for your story climax, it's time to work on the climax itself.

Fulfill the two criteria at the core of this pivotal plot point, and you minimize the potential for audiences to be disappointed by the ending of your screenplay or novel.

3 Quality Control Tests Your Story Climax Must Pass to Earn Audiences' Enthusiastic Seal of Approval

After you've nailed down the core of your story climax, you're not home-free yet. Now, it's time to fine-tune it, and make adjustments as necessary.

You must carefully inspect your climactic sequence, and run it through three critical quality control tests. Their results will determine if you've delivered a grand finale which is not merely satisfactory, but instead, deeply satisfying.

With this writing skills guide, you should ace these quality control tests with flying colors. As part of your winning strategy, you'll learn:

- how to balance “shiny moments” between your protagonist and other characters (plus, the one moment you absolutely CANNOT distribute to anyone besides your hero)
- 6 ways to use story stakes to provide audiences with an extra thrill after the climax—thereby deepening their satisfaction
- 5 methods to make your climax feel more epic in scope
- 12 techniques to extend the duration of your story climax (while still maintaining its intensity)

Sounds good, right?

But before we continue, you should be aware of the following:

1) Unless otherwise indicated, the tips in this book apply equally to screenplays and novels.

Despite this, I primarily use film examples to illustrate my points. That's because movies are more universal.

Chances are higher that you've watched, rather than read, *THE BOURNE IDENTITY*.

Even if you're a romance buff, it's more likely you've rented *NOTTING HILL* than skimmed a novel entitled *The Celebrity and the Civilian*.

2) I've done my best to pull examples from a variety of genres. I'll admit, though, there is a slant towards stories which include action, mystery, and thrills (including hybrids like action comedies and fantasy action).

That being said, examples from comedies and romantic comedies are included. Additionally, there is a special section (in the last chapter) which is dedicated to helping you avoid the dreaded “race to the airport” cliché which concludes so many romantic comedies.

Oh, of course, using lots of examples means there are some spoilers too.

Also, a few of these examples have cropped up on my website or in other writing guides I've authored.

3) I analyze movies using three-act structure. You might not like using three-act structure. That's cool. You can still benefit from this writing guide.

Where appropriate, just replace Act One with "the beginning," Act Two with "the middle," and Act Three with "the end" of your story. That way, you'll be able to make use of all of the tips in this book without any quibbling over structure.

Sometimes, I'll refer to the end of the second act as the hero's "trough of hell." This is my term for the setbacks he experiences prior to the climax. You might call this plot point the "all is lost" moment. They're the same.

4) Speaking of the end of your story, it has two components: the climax and the resolution. To achieve the coveted status of a closer, you need to master both of them.

But, although we'll occasionally discuss the resolution, for the most part, this book focuses on helping you craft a stronger story climax. (You knew that already, right? It is, after all, in the title!)

5) Subplots have their own climaxes too. However, unless otherwise indicated, the tips in this writing guide are primarily devoted to the climax of the main plot which occurs during Act Three.

6) As you can see, I use "all caps" to indicate movie titles, and italics for titles of novels. If a movie has been adapted from a book, I use all caps.

7) Finally, for the sake of simplicity, I tend to stick to masculine nouns and pronouns.

Okay, that's all.

To learn how to craft a story climax which thrills and delights and to take a step closer towards making a living through your creativity...turn the page!

How to Use 4 Categories of Antagonists and 8 Rules of Engagement to Build Your Story Climax on a Sturdy Foundation

Stories revolve around one central question: will the protagonist get what he wants?

The beginning of your story establishes this question by defining your protagonist's main goal, dream, or problem.

This question would be answered very quickly...if not for antagonists, the characters who repeatedly stand in between the protagonist and his heart's desire, and hence, generate the conflict which sustains your story's middle.

However, everything must come to an end. Your central story question must be answered once and for all.

This is the function of the climax.

It's the confrontation which *decisively* resolves the conflict between your protagonist and the antagonists who've thwarted him along the way.

As it's plain to see, the power of your story climax will depend upon scenes which occur (and decisions you've made) long before the climax actually begins.

That's what we'll focus on in the next two chapters: presenting various factors you should take into account in order to avoid constructing your climax on quicksand.

Are you ready? Let's do this!

4 Categories of Antagonists Which Will Help You Gain Insight into Your Protagonist's Opposition

More than any other character—including the protagonist—the antagonists of your screenplay or novel impact the climax to the greatest degree.

Because their resistance determines both the setting and the actions of the climax, they have the largest “climax footprint.”

They determine its context; they are its beating heart.

As such, it's essential to understand the basic nature of this opposing force. The classification system discussed in this chapter is designed to help you gain this valuable insight.

The system is comprised of four categories:

- villains
- nemeses
- amorous opponents
- rivals

Continue reading to dive into the details!

Antagonist Category #1: Villains

Villains are antagonists who engage in illegal acts, primarily out of evil intent.

Ruthless, powerful, and cunning, they are oftentimes willing to go to extreme lengths to achieve their objectives. For them, no amount of collateral damage is too high.

Despite their dark nature, it's somewhat trendy to cast villains in a sympathetic light. This isn't always necessary, and can backfire, particularly if audiences become too conflicted over whether they should be rooting against the villain or not.

Personally, as long as your villain doesn't turn into a mustache-twirling caricature, I think it's much more important for audiences to understand exactly *what* the villain is trying to accomplish, rather than *why* he is trying to pursue this objective.

If you're looking for ways to reduce your page count, perhaps you should eliminate the scenes designed to create sympathy for your villain. As a matter of fact, this is a major difference between the shooting script and the film version of STAR TREK (2009).

In the shooting script, audiences witness Nero being captured, and later on, being tortured by Klingons. In another scene, Nero expresses regret over his plan to extinguish Earth: "I'll take no pleasure in your extinction." Each scene increases audience sympathy for Nero—and each was edited out from the theatrical release (or was never shot at all).

If you'd like audiences to enjoy a complex relationship with your villain, instead of casting him in a sympathetic light, try altering the scope of his goal.

Slant it towards thievery rather than terrorism.

According to the director's commentary of DIE HARD, that's one of the major changes John McTiernan made to the story. In his words:

"People can have fun with a robbery. A terrorist story is, by definition, dark and unhappy. But with a good caper, you know, you can appreciate the bad guys

too. And that allows us to essentially put some ‘joy’ into the bad guy’s activity.”

In other words, if your villain’s main intent is to steal—even when he behaves appallingly—then audiences might regard him with a blend of admiration and hate (rather than just pure hate), which partially explains why film buffs drool over Hans Gruber almost as much as they do over John McClane.

By the same token, this inclination also explains why it’s so easy to turn thieves and con men into heroes as seen in *TO CATCH A THIEF*, the *FAST AND THE FURIOUS* franchise, multiple retellings of Robin Hood, and several George Clooney films (*OUT OF SIGHT*, *INTOLERABLE CRUELTY*, and the *OCEAN’S* trilogy).

Besides evil intent, villains are often, but not always, characterized by delegation. That is, they employ several people (henchmen, bodyguards, freelance mercenaries, etc) to carry out their orders.

In *Making a Good Script Great*, Linda Seger points out that such supporting characters “provide mass and weight to demonstrate the prestige, power, or stature of the protagonist or antagonist.”

If you’re writing an action comedy or light-hearted action-adventure, be especially careful with your villain’s “mass people.” It can be tempting to use their incompetence as a source of comic relief.

But following this path will likely lead to major problems. Since your villain is presumably in charge of hiring his mass people, their competence (or lack thereof) is a reflection of *him*.

So, if they’re bumbling idiots, by extension, your villain will look like an idiot for hiring them in the first place. This circumstance undercuts his menace, rendering him an ineffective adversary, which in turn, leads to an ineffective climax.

The stronger option is to examine your *protagonist’s* team for your potential source of comic relief. Of course, you don’t want to make your hero look like a huge fool for the sake of a joke. All the same, you have more leeway with him than you do with a villain.

You also have more leeway with your hero’s sidekicks than you do with the

villain's mass people. For instance, the hero could be saddled with an incompetent sidekick whom the hero can't get rid of, due to misguided loyalty or bureaucratic regulations.

In terms of providing humor while maintaining the villain's menace, *BEVERLY HILLS COP* is a grade-A model to study. Foley's humorous schemes (the fake Michael Jackson interview, the banana in the tailpipe, the tall tale about "super-cops," etc) entertain audiences, all while underscoring Foley's intelligence.

Further comic relief is provided by his sidekicks, Rosewood and Taggart, whose naïveté enables them to amuse audiences without making the two cops seem like complete imbeciles.

While henchmen and other mass people can be used to demonstrate the villain's power (and sometimes cowardice), it's important to remember that during the climax, audiences want to see the hero dealing directly with the villain, not the villain's underlings.

This topic will be investigated in greater depth in a later chapter. For now, it's time to move onto our next category of antagonist—cue the ominous drumbeat!—the nemesis.

Antagonist Category #2: Nemeses

Conceptually, nemeses are similar to villains. Like villains, they constantly challenge the protagonist. They frequently employ a retinue of mass people. They are also powerful, ruthless, and sometimes, downright cruel.

Casino mogul Terry Benedict of OCEAN'S 11 (2001) is a great example. So too is THE TRUMAN SHOW's domineering creator and executive producer, Christof.

Same goes for THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA's terrifying editor-in-chief, Miranda Priestly and 9 TO 5's chauvinist vice president Franklin Hart. (Bosses, in general, make great nemeses.)

However, in contrast to villains, nemeses are not evil.

Despicable and mean, maybe—hello queen bee MEAN GIRL Regina George!—but not evil.

They may even be motivated by good intentions. Parental figures in films such as COMING TO AMERICA, BEND IT LIKE BECKHAM, THE PROPOSAL, and 10 THINGS I HATE ABOUT YOU, all want their children to be happy.

Despite this praiseworthy desire, these parental figures are all nemeses because their definition of happiness differs from their child's. Consequently, these parents stand in between their offspring and their offspring's dreams.

Unlike villains, bumbling nemeses can still yield effective antagonists—as long as they demonstrate competence in other arenas.

Take the aforementioned Franklin Hart. His inability to adjust his office chair is hilarious. Nonetheless, this failing notwithstanding, Hart manages to come across as a worthy adversary who knows how to maximize his advantages against the heroines.

It's not always easy to achieve the right balance. Out of all the antagonist categories, it seems to me that nemeses are the most inconsistently portrayed: cutthroat in one scene, but ineffectual in the next. Oftentimes, this weakness arises through poor handling of the nemesis's mass people.

To reinforce your nemesis's power, his mass people should be competent. By the same token, they shouldn't be so competent that they make the nemesis appear incompetent in comparison.

For example, in a 1999 screenplay draft of OCEAN'S 11, written by Ted Griffin, Terry Benedict's casino manager and a security guard figure out how Ocean and his crew of con men successfully pulled off the heist. These two mass people had to explain everything to Benedict.

This makes them look smart. Benedict, on the other hand, looks clueless in comparison. Fortunately, in the film, Benedict explains Ocean's process to his mass people, thereby reinforcing Benedict's status as a formidable foe.

There's a special kind of nemesis I like to think of as a "third wheel" because he functions similarly to a third wheel on a date. However, instead of preventing the hero from hooking up with the heroine, this antagonist prevents the hero from battling with the villain...until the climax, when the third wheel nemesis frequently transforms into a valuable ally.

Adding a third wheel nemesis to your story is a simple, but effective technique to spice up any action movie, mystery, or thriller—especially if you're struggling to generate more conflict and complicate your hero's life in an organic way.

If you're interested in implementing it, there are two basic approaches to adopt. One mines the power of surprise; the other, the power of dramatic irony.

As an example of the former, examine MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE IV – GHOST PROTOCOL. The villain frames Ethan Hunt for an explosion which destroyed part of the Kremlin. Accordingly, Sidorov, a Russian investigative officer, hunts Ethan down, further complicating Ethan's mission to stop the villain.

Right when Ethan is hot on the villain's tail, Sidorov pounces on Ethan outside the steps of the Burj Khalifa. Sidorov's unexpected arrival comes as a complete (but thrilling) surprise to audiences who were unlikely to anticipate his appearance at this point in the story.

If you want to use a similar approach in your screenplay or novel, follow GHOST PROTOCOL's model. Sufficient time must elapse between your third wheel nemesis's unexpected arrival and his last appearance to maintain the

surprise, but not so much that audiences forget who he is by the time he makes his surprise entrance.

Alternatively, you can mine the power of dramatic irony. Instead of keeping your third wheel nemesis on the fringes of your story, you'd show audiences his thought processes, how he predicts the hero's next move.

By knowing that the third wheel nemesis is en route to the same destination as the hero, audiences won't experience the thrill of surprise, but the thrill of dramatic irony.

They'll be on pins and needles, wondering if the third wheel nemesis will catch the hero *before* the hero has a chance to do whatever he needs to do to thwart the villain.

Both THE FUGITIVE and MINORITY REPORT use this approach to excellent effect, (although for reasons we'll discuss later on, the latter falls apart at the climax).

Antagonist Category #3: Amorous Opponents

As the name implies, amorous opponents are engaged in a battle for love, whether it be of the familial, platonic, or romantic variety.

Since audiences want your characters to find the love they are seeking, in this situation, audiences are emotionally aligned with both the protagonist *and* the amorous opponent antagonist. This is one feature which distinguishes this antagonist category from the others in our system.

Furthermore, audiences will be on board with both amorous opponents in the pairing, even when these adversaries are not genuinely engaged in the pursuit of love. That is to say, one may be faking interest in the other in order to achieve another objective.

For instance, in *10 THINGS I HATE ABOUT YOU*, Patrick's interest in Kat is sparked by greed for extra cash, but eventually, he's spurred on by something more pure. Till then, audiences still root for Patrick because they expect his motivation to change. (Plus, there's someone worse for them to hate: aspiring model and sleazy Casanova wannabe, Joey Donner.)

Alternatively, both amorous opponents might not want anything to do with each other at all. Underneath that conscious want, however, lies a subconscious need for *l'amour*.

The hero might express wariness towards love, and the heroine might not be searching for it, but we, the audience, know that's exactly what each of them is craving.

If both individuals in an amorous pairing do not consciously seek love (with either genuine or, as in *10 THINGS*, artificial intention), *then one—or both of them—must have another goal which is clearly explained to the audience.* (In a multiple-protagonist story, this goal may even come from another character altogether.)

For the sake of clarity, I'm going to refer to this conscious goal as Goal A. In a buddy cop movie, Goal A will invariably involve stopping the villain.

In a romance novel or romantic comedy screenplay, you have more options.

The antagonist who threatens Goal A may be an outside character, and the amorous opponents are, in this respect, united in their desire to overcome this foe.

In other cases, an amorous opponent may take on “double duty,” standing in the way of the other protagonist’s conscious goal—whatever that may be—as well as becoming centrally involved in the protagonist’s subconscious search for love.

For instance, in *SWEET HOME ALABAMA*, Melanie isn’t looking to win back the heart of Jake, her estranged husband; she wants to secure his signature on their divorce papers. Hence, he functions as both her amorous opponent and her nemesis. (Technically, as a romantic rival, he plays “triple duty,” but we haven’t reached that antagonist category yet!)

If you’re writing a series (or if you’re taking a non-conventional approach to a standalone screenplay or novel), the antagonistic relationship between your amorous opponents is likely to take on a different dynamic.

At first, your amorous opponents might consciously or subconsciously seek each other’s love. But once that love is established, another source of antagonism must drive their conflict.

The threat of loss is a common choice. While your amorous opponents can be separated through capture, death, or banishment, that’s not what I’m talking about.

Here, I’m referring to an existential threat which is more emotional, and less physical, in nature: one amorous opponent, having gained love (or perhaps approval and respect), now fears that the other will withdraw it.

For instance, the friendship between Holmes and Watson is solid. It’s the threat of losing Watson to marriage which is at the root of Holmes’s arguments with Watson in both *SHERLOCK HOLMES* and *SHERLOCK HOLMES 2: GAME OF SHADOWS*.

Similarly, in *BRIDESMAIDS*, Annie and Lillian start out as BFFs. However, Annie’s fear that Lillian is leaving her behind motivates Annie’s outrageous behavior, ironically causing their eventual estrangement.

To be clear, the existence of a loving or romantic relationship between two characters doesn't necessarily mean they are amorous opponents. For example, in *BACK TO THE FUTURE*, Marty doesn't try to win Jennifer's love; he already has it.

Her presence in the story is used for other purposes, namely to set up information which plays a crucial role at the climax and to represent what Marty loses if he doesn't return to the future, (ie the stakes).

Similarly, if the love and affection between, let's say, a father and his child, are pre-established, then these characters won't be amorous opponents. The father figure may be extremely supportive (as in *JUNO*), or perhaps may function as a nemesis (as described in the preceding section).

Antagonist Category #4: Rivals

Rivals are a special kind of nemesis. They compete with your protagonist over the same goal, usually to win something, whether it be a promotion (professional rivalry), a competition (sports rivalry), or the love of another character (romantic rivalry).

If you're writing a story which revolves around a rivalry, answering these three questions may aid you during the plotting process:

- How far are your protagonist and his rival willing to go to achieve victory?
- Does the rivalry between the protagonist and his rival predate the events of your story? (And if yes, by how much?)
- What flaw would prevent your protagonist from achieving his goal, even if his rival was removed from your story?

Answering the first question can help you develop interesting moral dilemmas for your characters, while answering the second can help you deepen audience sympathy for your protagonist.

In addition to giving your story greater depth, answering the third one can help you ascertain what should transpire at the climax. Before your protagonist can achieve victory, his actions or words must demonstrate that he has truly overcome his flaw.

In *CRAZY STUPID LOVE*, for instance, Emily's affair with David Lindhagen is a symptom of a larger problem. Even if Lindhagen wasn't in the picture, Cal and Emily's relationship would still be in trouble because Cal stopped making an effort. During the last stage of the climax, Cal publicly vows never to give up on his marriage. By doing so, he is finally able to win Emily back.

Love triangles, obviously, are driven by romantic rivalry. Revealing when your characters are, in fact, entangled in a love triangle is not so cut and dried.

For instance, when your hero meets the heroine, it may appear that she is unattached, but shortly thereafter, you will reveal that her heart is otherwise engaged (as in *WEDDING CRASHERS*).

In this case, audiences will be clued into the romantic rivalry early on in your story. As an alternative, your protagonist, without even realizing it, could be competing against a rival for another character's affections. When you reveal the rival's existence late in your story (as in *WORKING GIRL*), your protagonist—and audiences—will learn the truth.

While your protagonist will be devastated by the unwelcome discovery, audience response will be less straightforward. Audiences will be dismayed by this new complication, but also, simultaneously delighted by the unexpected surprise.

The sequence of reveals in *SENSE AND SENSIBILITY* is especially worthy of study. When Elinor falls for Edward, it seems like only their differences in financial status and his family's opposition stand between them. But another force, a heretofore unknown romantic rival, also impedes Elinor and Edward's happiness.

Although Elinor and audiences make this startling discovery midway through the film, other characters continue to remain in the dark, yielding a more intense emotional experience for all parties—characters and audiences alike—during its latter half.

Happy endings are generally much more popular than tragic ones. If you're not a fan of unmitigated happy endings, a rivalry may enable you to craft an ending which is more bittersweet in nature, but which is, nevertheless, still palatable to audiences. The key is to award your protagonist a substitute prize which audiences will regard as an acceptable replacement.

Second place isn't as great as first, but since it was achieved through honest work in *BRING IT ON*, it is, all the same, a victory worthy of celebration.

In *WITNESS*, even though Rachel ends up with John's rival, this outcome isn't entirely tragic. This rival is kind to her and her son, and furthermore, she and John—and audiences—can comfort themselves with the memory of their romance, which didn't have the chance to sour, as it could've done had they remained together, despite the significant differences in their worldviews.

* * *

At this point, you might be wondering how necessary it is to place your

antagonist into one of these four categories. After all, distinctions—especially between villains and nemeses—can be quite subjective.

You may perceive 9 TO 5's Franklin Hart as a villain, not a nemesis (as I've categorized him). Perhaps, despite the harm inflicted by PG&E in ERIN BROCKOVICH, you might think it's a stretch to view the utility company as villainous.

Truth be told, it's not compulsory to box your antagonist into a specific category. Nonetheless, it can certainly be beneficial.

Doing so can help you:

- determine how far your antagonist is willing to go (if he's more of a nemesis than a villain, you might want to tone down his actions against your hero)
- decide how to divvy up your scenes (in a love triangle, the rival who eventually emerges the victor will typically have more scenes than the rival who doesn't)
- construct more complex plots (layering in antagonists from different categories will add a variety of complications to your story, yielding a satisfying plot loaded with organic conflict)

As a matter of fact, we'll explore that last benefit in greater detail in the next chapter...

8 Rules of Engagement Which Will Give “Claws” to Antagonist Conflict

Now that you’re familiar with the antagonist category system, it’s time to go one step further.

As you know, the presence of antagonist conflict is a necessary, but insufficient, condition to produce a successful story—and a gripping climax. To be effective, this conflict has to meet certain standards.

It can’t be dull. It has to have “claws.”

That’s not going to happen with an antagonist who’s poorly designed, nor with conflict which is underdeveloped or improperly resolved.

The eight rules of engagement in this chapter should help you sharpen the claws of the conflict generated by your protagonist’s opposition. Following them should minimize the aforementioned pitfalls and maximize your story’s entertainment value.

So, let’s get out our sharpening stones and begin!

Rule of Engagement #1: Your Story Must Include an Antagonistic Force Which Can Be Classified by at Least One Category

This rule may seem glaringly obvious, but it's easy to overlook, especially if you become overly enamored of your story premise.

In BRUCE ALMIGHTY, Bruce gets to play god. A five-star concept for sure.

Even so, the entire movie couldn't consist of Bruce parting red soup or engaging in other hijinks of that ilk.

The film would've turned into a comedy sketch if Bruce didn't first try to use his powers to steal the news anchor position from his rival, and then later, win back the love of his ex-girlfriend.

Those twin goals—and their corresponding antagonists—sustain the high-concept premise, give the story its spine, and provide clear objectives for Bruce to achieve at the climax.

To be clear, your protagonist doesn't need to face an antagonist from every category (although, as we'll see in rule of engagement #4, this can add welcome layers of complexity to your story).

Still, he does need to repeatedly clash with *someone*, whether this character is a villain, nemesis, amorous opponent, or rival.

If your villain is invisible for most of your story (as is commonly the case in murder mysteries, for instance), you need to find a way to keep the quotient of conflict high (and thus keep audiences entertained) until the climax, when the villain's identity will finally be revealed.

In this situation, combing through the various antagonist categories can be a real lifesaver, enabling you to effortlessly include a *visible* antagonist for your hero to fight with throughout the second act.

Jurisdictional clashes with a nemesis from another law enforcement agency, rivalry with an intradepartmental colleague, a budding relationship (either a romantic one with love interest or a platonic one with the hero's professional

partner)—all of these are routinely used in murder mysteries to good effect.

Note: action movies and thrillers which mask the identity of the villain employ a comparable tactic. We'll discuss this topic at length in the next chapter.

Rule of Engagement #2: This Antagonistic Force Must Be Embodied Within a Single Entity

As a general rule, your antagonist should be embodied within a single entity (as opposed to a collective group whose individual members are indistinguishable from one another).

Here's why: if you've done your job right, audiences will be rooting *for* your protagonist to succeed at the climax. But their emotional experience will be intensified if, in addition, they're also strongly rooting *against* the bad guy.

This usually won't happen if your antagonist is embodied by a multitude of characters.

Since there are so many antagonists for audiences to direct their dislike against, their response tends to become correspondingly dilute. Consequently, the climax winds up being less powerful than it could've been.

To illustrate, let's examine the ending of MR AND MRS SMITH. The eponymous couple faces off against a bevy of masked assassins. While audiences want the Smiths to survive the battle, audience response towards the assassins is likely to be ambivalent.

How could they feel otherwise?

Although lethal, each assassin is indistinct from the other. Nameless and faceless, they all blur together into one amorphous antagonistic force. Their lack of individuality creates a climax which feels curiously generic.

According to the DVD commentary with director Doug Liman and screenwriter Simon Kinberg, these filmmakers believe this ending essentially works because a) whom the Smiths are working *against* doesn't matter, the important thing is that they are working *together*, and b) the faceless bad guys are symbolic of the myriad threats which constantly attack one's marriage.

This is certainly an interesting interpretation. Even so, there is one screenplay draft floating around which still honors this idea, but at the same time, doesn't make the bad guys completely anonymous.

In the climax of this draft, a bureaucrat named Horner distinctly emerges from the mass of antagonists. The Smiths confront both Horner and his anonymous posse of hired guns. A more conventional approach, perhaps—and I’d argue, a more effective one.

As a contrasting example, look at the Battle of the Pelennor Fields in *LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RETURN OF THE KING*. Gondor is besieged by an army of Orcs, each of whom could’ve blended together to form an amorphous, hostile mass.

However, this didn’t happen because one Orc, the atrociously ugly Gothmog, was elevated above the others, enabling audiences to concentrate their animosity against this single individual.

As director Peter Jackson explains in the commentary of the special extended DVD edition, this choice was intentional:

“In addition to the Witch-King, we wanted to create another Orc character, who was like the general on the battlefield. Because we felt that our Orcs were so anonymous, we wanted to actually personify one or two of them, just to give our villainy a focus.”

One more example, this time from *ERIN BROCKOVICH*. The villainous utility company PG&E is not embodied by a single person, but rather, by a crop of indistinguishable corporate attorneys working on its behalf.

This is atypical. Stories in *ERIN*’s mold traditionally have one central figure as the antagonist, oftentimes a high-level employee whose profit-oriented decisions were responsible for endangering a particular community. For the sake of realism, director Steven Soderbergh decided to take a different tack.

In this case, it seems he made the right call. Although the villainous force in *ERIN* is spread across multiple characters, it didn’t hurt the film’s success any. Indeed, audience anger against the utility remained healthy and strong, in part because the story does a wonderful job of showing the utility’s impact on its victims.

Nonetheless, I’d be cautious about implementing this approach in your own screenplay or novel. In inexperienced hands, it can easily result in a weak antagonist, which, in turn, produces a disappointingly weak story climax.

Rule of Engagement #3: With Rare Exception, This Antagonistic Entity Should Be Human

In most cases, antagonists should be human or humanlike (anthropomorphized androids or animals).

Since stories are all about getting audiences to feel, this makes sense. People invest emotionally in other people—not abstract concepts like injustice and evil.

Secondly, if your antagonist is not a person, *who or what exactly is your hero going to confront at the climax?*

What does a confrontation against an outdated tradition, political corruption, or the world's evil *look* like?

Going along with this idea, how would audiences know that your protagonist has succeeded (or failed) at the end?

How would they know he defeated corruption, injustice, or evil?

If you want your hero to battle with an abstract foe, then it's best to manifest this foe through *a single human being* who will function as the villain or nemesis of your story.

As inspiration, check out the following examples:

- guilt could be manifested through a subconscious projection of the hero's dead wife (INCEPTION)
- political corruption could be embodied by a slimy chief of staff (DAVE)
- an evil artificial intelligence program could be signified by a simulated human body, Agent Smith (THE MATRIX)
- legal injustice could be represented by an ambitious district attorney (LAW ABIDING CITIZEN)

What about stories where the protagonist is his own worst enemy?

The same principle applies. The protagonist's flaw might very well be the

thing which is preventing him from achieving the life he consciously wants (or subconsciously needs).

But in order to show that he's conquered such a flaw, it first needs to be made visible.

Of course, the hero himself will manifest this flaw at the outset of your story. All the same, to demonstrate the flaw's successful elimination, you usually need to bring in another character.

More often than not, this character will appear in the form of an amorous opponent, who functions as a visual correlate to your protagonist's internal struggle, oftentimes catalyzing his transformation as well as reflecting it.

In many stories, the protagonist's climactic pursuit of his amorous opponent (as in *ABOUT A BOY* and *AS GOOD AS IT GETS*) will reveal the protagonist's growth. In rare cases like *BRUCE ALMIGHTY*, the protagonist's climactic decision to let go of his loved one indicates his evolution into a better person.

Forces of nature—the cornerstone of several survival and disaster flicks—are a major exception to this rule of engagement.

Even though this type of antagonist isn't human, audiences can easily imagine what the protagonist is going to confront at the climax. Furthermore, the protagonist's existence at the end is proof of his success.

That being said, the quality of your story will be greatly enhanced by adding human antagonists (from any antagonist category) to the mix. This will add texture to your story, preventing it from becoming a “one-note” battle against a natural force.

Plus, if you're writing a screenplay, this will also increase your story's timelessness. Because special effects are constantly improving, a few years from now, the spectacle of your force of nature will probably fail to dazzle on-screen.

The drama between your human characters, on the other hand, will continue to hold appeal.

In TWISTER, for instance, the heroine must contend with vicious twisters (force of nature nemesis), as well as her estranged husband (amorous opponent), her estranged husband's fiancée (romantic rival), and another tornado chaser (professional rival). Because of the conflict provided by these human antagonists, the film is compelling today, even though its special effects can be considered outdated.

Speaking of time...

...like with forces of nature, although this entity isn't human, time can still be a potent story antagonist.

However, while time may take on larger-than-life status and, in some cases, become the dominant force opposing your protagonist at the climax, it usually coexists with another human antagonist, perhaps a dim-witted bully (BACK TO THE FUTURE), a good-natured news producer (GROUNDHOG DAY), or the protagonist's dead wife (INCEPTION).

Rule of Engagement #4: To Increase Conflict, Include More Antagonists

If your story lacks conflict, add a new antagonist to your cast of characters.

While this personage may come from the same category as the antagonist established by rule of engagement #1, try to vary it up.

Include more layers of complexity and enhance your story's texture by including antagonists from *different* category types.

Indeed, this is one of the prime advantages of using the antagonist category system in the first place. It provides you with an accessible starting point when you know you need more conflict—and perhaps complexity—in your story, but you're not quite sure how to generate it.

Does your hero defeat your villain too easily? Consider adding a third wheel nemesis.

After you've completed 65% of your romantic comedy, is it impossible to credibly keep your hero and heroine apart any longer? A romantic rival could be just the ticket.

Even so, don't be *too* hasty to adopt this approach.

More is not always merrier.

Your story may feel flat not because it lacks a sufficient number of antagonists but because the conflict between your protagonist and his extant antagonists isn't, at present, developed as thoroughly as it should be.

Perhaps, the hero of your action flick hasn't dueled directly with the villain enough. Or, the heroes of your buddy cop mystery aren't squabbling enough.

Amplify these core conflicts first, before attempting to add another antagonist to your story.

If you're not careful, expanding your cast can quickly turn your screenplay or novel into an unfocused, unwieldy mess which spins off into too many

directions. In addition, extraneous antagonists are bound to irritate or confuse audiences who wonder why these characters were included at all.

In FOOL'S GOLD, treasure hunter Finn has multiple antagonists to contend with: his estranged ex-wife (amorous opponent), a treasure hunter looking to find the treasure himself (professional rival), and a rapper who wants Finn dead (villain).

Technically, the person who artfully hid the treasure would also be Finn's nemesis. An invisible one, but a nemesis all the same.

At first glance, this motley crew of antagonists may seem like they'd create the perfect combination of action, romance, and adventure. But the rival treasure hunter, Moe, competes with Finn infrequently. As an antagonist, Moe is severely underutilized, only contributing to one set piece.

Besides that, Moe offers very little to the story. His presence dilutes the other conflicts, rather than enhancing them. The film probably would've been stronger if Moe's character had been eliminated altogether.

Then, the time spent establishing his character could be reallocated to exploring the tension between Finn and his ex-wife, which, like Moe, tends to disappear for extensive swaths of time.

Alternatively, Moe could've been used more frequently to obstruct Finn. This would bloat the running time—and budget—of the film, so this solution would work better in a novel where there's more leeway regarding length, and nowhere near the prohibitions regarding cost.

Rule of Engagement #5: A Character Can Occupy More Than One Antagonist Category

When you realize that an antagonist has inadvertently vanished from your story, instead of eliminating this antagonist altogether or expanding his role, you can also merge his role with another antagonist's.

A professional nemesis could also be the heroine's romantic rival (WORKING GIRL) or her amorous opponent (YOU'VE GOT MAIL), a sports rival could double up as the hero's romantic rival (TIN CUP), and the "black widow" archetype is always a combination of a villainess and an amorous opponent (BODY HEAT, THE DARK KNIGHT RISES).

With this strategy, you preserve the conflict that multiple antagonists provide, while minimizing the potential for them to turn into "clutter."

Your story's cohesion will remain intact, its conflict quotient will remain high...and members of your audience will remain engaged.

If we apply this approach to FOOL'S GOLD, we have another possible solution to fix the script. As discussed above, Finn's professional rival, Moe, doesn't contribute much to the story. And Finn's conflict with his ex-wife virtually disappears once her boss decides to fund Finn's treasure hunt.

But what happens if we merge these two antagonist categories together?

We nix Moe, but keep Finn's ex-wife, Tess. In this version, she'd be pursuing the treasure herself, independently of Finn. Because Tess and Finn would no longer be participating in a joint venture, she'd be his professional rival as well as his amorous opponent.

Our revamped version possesses advantages over the original. It contains the same level of conflict, but doesn't waste screenplay real estate to introduce Moe's character and integrate his rivalry into the script.

Do our changes yield a stronger story?

Maybe, maybe not.

Assuming that all conflicts in the original premise were sufficiently developed, it's hard to render a verdict. In other situations, the answer is going to be more clear-cut.

Consider *GHOST*. Murdered, Sam has transformed into a ghost who isn't ready to leave New York City. Not yet. At one point during his disembodied life on earth, Sam witnesses his girlfriend, Molly, kissing his co-worker (and friend), Carl.

Since audiences are emotionally aligned with Sam, like him, they don't want to see Molly move on—and certainly not with Sam's friend. That'd be enough for them to feel betrayed on Sam's behalf.

But Molly's not just kissing a regular old romantic rival.

Although Molly remains in the dark, audiences—and Sam—are aware that Carl is also responsible for Sam's murder. Before, audiences would've been outraged. Now, due to the depth of Carl's crimes, they're horrified.

If Carl hadn't been both romantic rival and villain, this scene wouldn't have packed nearly the same emotional punch.

In sum, by having a character occupy more than one antagonist category, audiences can respond to a *single* setback on *two* different emotional levels, deepening their engagement, and hence, creating a more powerful story experience.

In other words, merging antagonist categories will yield a stronger story, or perhaps merely a different one, but it's unlikely to produce a weaker incarnation of the original.

Use it boldly!

It's one of the most effective techniques to add to your storytelling bag of tricks.

In fact, if you apply the same principle to your other characters, so that they too, fulfill more than one function, you will avoid making the dreaded amateur mistake of overpopulating your screenplay or novel with too many characters.

Rule of Engagement #6: The Protagonist and His Antagonist(s) Should Be Well-Matched

Do you remember that epic, five-set 2008 Wimbledon final between Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer?

The match was gripping to watch for two equally important reasons. Both tennis players were at the peak of their game. Furthermore, both their peaks were of comparable levels—stratospherically high.

To drive this comparison home, let's assign numerical values to each player's peak, with 1 being the lowest, and 10 being the highest.

This championship match wouldn't have been very thrilling if one tennis player had been at level 4, while the other had been at level 9. Barring a major upset, the player at level 9 would've mopped the floor with the other.

If both players had been at level 6, the final would've been more exciting than when their peaks vastly differed. But, on the other hand, a match between players at level 6 is not going to be half as interesting as when both players are at level 10.

In short, for your climax to be exciting and entertaining, like Nadal and Federer, your protagonist needs to be well-matched against well-endowed antagonist(s).

If your protagonist is too strong, then he should quickly overcome his weak antagonist. Their climactic encounter will be over before it has a chance to really begin.

If your protagonist is too weak, it won't be credible for him to defeat his antagonist, who's much stronger.

Either way, your climax will be a huge disappointment.

To avoid this, make sure that your antagonist is a worthwhile adversary for your protagonist (and vice versa).

Take care not to favor one party over the other—a common amateur mistake.

Both should be intelligent, driven, resourceful, and if necessary in your story, physically strong.

They should be so well-matched that the only reason audiences believe your protagonist will succeed is because they're banking on the fact that most stories do, indeed, end happily.

But if not for this statistic, the outcome of your climax—like the 2008 Gentlemen's Wimbledon Championships—would be in question.

That's how you create a climax filled with tension and suspense.

That's how you keep audiences at the edge of their seats.

Making your protagonist and his antagonist(s) well-matched has added benefits too. It makes the protagonist's clashes with his antagonist prior to the climax much more engaging, strengthening your screenplay or novel as a whole.

Since these clashes are so satisfying, as a welcome side effect, audiences are going to look forward to the climax—the culmination of these “small-scale” clashes—with even greater enthusiasm.

In a romance, well-matched amorous opponents also deepen the resonance of the stakes. If one of them, the hero, for instance, is less than impressive, then it's not going to be a big deal if the heroine doesn't win his love at the end. After all, she can just find another—a far superior—fish in the pond.

Conversely, if the hero, flaws and all, is perfect for her, then losing him would devastate her. Hence, the climax, which will determine the fate of this couple once and for all, will elicit a deeper degree of emotion.

Handicapping (and Fortifying) Protagonists and Antagonists through Mentors, Mass People, and Other Means

If you want to construct the tallest building in the world, there are two basic ways to go about it.

You could literally construct the tallest building in the world, making it taller than your structural competition. Alternately, you could construct a moderately tall building, and then purchase—and tear down—your taller competitors.

Similarly, to maintain the balance between your protagonist and antagonist, prior to, or in the midst of, the climax, you'll have to fortify or handicap either party. The path you take will, in large part, be determined by how strong or weak each party initially is.

HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS demonstrates this concept perfectly. Harry is faced with an intriguing dilemma. He can either handicap Voldemort by destroying horcruxes, objects which have been imbued with bits of Voldemort's soul. Or, Harry can fortify himself by collecting hallows, magical objects which enable their owners to evade death.

Granted, destroying horcruxes and collecting hallows are uncommon ways to keep the protagonist and antagonist well-matched. To accomplish this objective, you'll probably have to avail yourself of other methods.

As a springboard for your muse, consider one of the tried and true suggestions below:

1) Handicap the protagonist by removing his mentor

The presence of a potent mentor can make your protagonist's side too strong, resulting in the flaws we discussed earlier. If the mentor participates in the climax, because he's so powerful, the outcome of the climax will be a foregone conclusion—and a snooze-fest.

On the other hand, if the mentor doesn't participate in the climax, his nonappearance will raise issues of credibility. If he's still around, why didn't he help the protagonists to fight the bad guy?

The solution, then, is to somehow remove the mentor from the picture prior to the climax, so he, quite plausibly, can't participate in it. Thus, the protagonist's chances of success are reduced, putting the "how" of the protagonist's victory into question, thereby paving the way for a more gripping finale.

The mentor doesn't have to be killed, mind you; his removal can be effective even if it's only temporary.

Returning to the world of Harry Potter again provides the perfect illustrative example. Harry's mentor, legendary wizard and Hogwarts headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, once subdued Voldemort. If necessary, Dumbledore presumably

can vanquish Voldemort yet another time. As long as Dumbledore is around, success is virtually guaranteed (especially in the early installments of the series when Voldemort is still in recovery-mode).

Hence, if the climax is one Dumbledore could participate in, to make this pivotal plot point more enthralling, the films (and novels, obviously) go to great lengths to take Dumbledore out of the picture, enabling Harry to confront Voldemort *mano-a-mano*.

For example, in the first film, THE SORCERER'S STONE, when Voldemort infiltrates Hogwarts (the castle, not the forest), Dumbledore is engaged in an errand which has taken him away from the school grounds. Since Dumbledore is not there to offer his protection to Harry and Harry's friends, they must stop Voldemort themselves.

As other examples, study the first three films in the X-MEN franchise. It's no coincidence that in all of them, Professor Xavier is never able to use his considerable powers to assist the protagonists at the climax.

In the first, he is poisoned (rather hastily, I might add). In the second, he is taken captive, and put under mind control. Finally, in the third, he is killed—an outcome which not only led to a more effective climax but also yielded a compelling midpoint.

2) Handicap the protagonist by (credibly) removing his mass people

So far, we've primarily focused on the relationship between mass people and the antagonist. But, protagonists can be surrounded by mass people too, oftentimes professional subordinates such as personal assistants and crime techs, for example.

This state of affairs can create an undesirable imbalance at the climax, especially if the antagonist is a lone operator (who, despite his lack of mass people, is clearly a formidable adversary due to his intelligence, determination, and resourcefulness).

However, if the protagonist tries to confront a diabolical antagonist *without* bringing his mass people with him, then the protagonist can look rather foolish, which hampers the climax's potential to captivate.

Basically, to put the protagonist and the antagonist on more equal footing, and thus increase the odds your story climax will enthrall audiences, you need to find a way to separate the protagonist from his mass people in a way which doesn't make the protagonist appear stupid.

Perhaps, your protagonist does bring a couple of mass people with him, but they get injured by the antagonist during the first half of the climax. Alternately, the vastness of the setting mandates that, despite their reluctance to do so, the protagonist and his mass people must split up.

If the stakes are high, and the protagonist is running out of time, he may pursue the antagonist without waiting for backup because the protagonist believes (usually rightly) that by the time backup arrives, it will be too late to save the stakes.

Those are pretty standard options. There's another option too: misdirection.

Due to the way circumstances are presented, audiences will draw a certain conclusion, which is, ideally, appealing in its own right. Then, you reveal that the circumstances actually lead to an alternative possibility, one audiences never would've guessed.

Although misdirection requires extra effort to execute, when done well, it should yield wonderful dividends. Since audiences are thrilled by the unexpected surprise (the discovery of the alternative possibility), they will feel that you've gone beyond paying off your narrative debts, exceeded their expectations, and deposited a "surplus" into their pockets!

THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS, (incidentally a master class in misdirection), uses it to excellent effect in order to separate Clarice from her fellow FBI agents at the climax in a way which is believable—and significantly more suspenseful than if she had arrived on Buffalo Bill's doorstep with a posse of agents by her side.

3) Handicap the antagonist by removing his mass people

To weaken the antagonist, and thus give the protagonist a shot at success, divest the antagonist of the mass people who, heretofore, reinforced his power.

In an action movie, this commonly equates to good guys killing off the

villain's henchmen prior to, or in the midst of, the climax. You could also arrange for the villain's henchmen to:

- leave the villain's side to prepare the villain's getaway
- abandon the villain because they're disgruntled with his leadership
- check on an unexpected problem—engineered by the protagonist for this very reason

Another option is to have the villain eliminate his own henchmen (as Gabriel does in *LIVE FREE OR DIE HARD*). Even though the villain is divested of his mass people, and hence, is theoretically more susceptible to the hero, by emphasizing the villain's ruthlessness, this choice paradoxically reinforces his power.

Taking the villain's henchmen out of the picture is fairly easy. When your antagonist falls under the nemesis category, removing his mass people will require especially creative means.

As inspiration, examine the ending of *9 TO 5*. Although the heroines have taken their nemesis, Franklin Hart, captive, his loyal administrative assistant, Roz, still poses a potent threat. Since she's his "eyes, ears, nose, and throat," she can jeopardize the heroines' ruse, making Hart's eventual victory inevitable.

Therefore, to handicap him, the heroines have to remove her. Ingeniously, they fake a memo requesting that she journey to France to participate in a lengthy language immersion course. Filled with delight, Roz goes off to Europe. Equally delighted by the heroines' ingenuity, audiences can't wait to see what happens next.

Another clever (and comedic) use of mass people can be found in *MEAN GIRLS*. Regina George is so important, she even outsources her hugs through her friend (and minion), Gretchen. In this way, Gretchen reinforces Regina's power.

As a matter of fact, as long as Regina has Gretchen and another friend/minion by her side, Regina's impervious. She can't be ousted as queen bee of North Shore High. However, as Cady and her co-conspirators conclude, Gretchen—when put under sufficient pressure—can "crack," turn against Regina, and

transform into a weakness which can be exploited to Cady's advantage.

This example illuminates an interesting point: while mass people reinforce an antagonist's power, ironically, they all also represent points of vulnerability which can, under certain conditions, be used to take down the antagonist.

Remembering this truth may be the very thing which helps you maintain the balance of power between your protagonist and antagonist at the climax.

4) Fortify the protagonist through illusory mass people

Strengthen your protagonist—and impress audiences with his ingenuity—by bolstering his power through *illusory* mass people: individuals who make the protagonist appear more powerful, but who, unbeknownst to the antagonist, don't augment the protagonist's position at all.

Think of that scene in *ERIN BROCKOVICH* (incidentally, not from the climax), when a trio of PG&E's lawyers who look like "Secret Service" invades Ed's law offices. To make himself appear equally intimidating, Ed expands his own roster of personnel from a duo into a quartet. Cramming two staffers into his conference room, he boldly passes them off as lawyers employed by his firm.

Another great example of illusory mass people is in *A FEW GOOD MEN*, when Kaffee's co-counsel arrives at the courtroom trial with two airmen in tow. Blithely drawing Jessep's attention to these airmen, Kaffee insinuates that they will provide testimony proving that Jessep is a liar. As Kaffee intended, this information unnerves Jessep and weakens this formidable foe.

As it turns out, Kaffee was bluffing. Audiences—along with Jessep—had been misdirected into believing the airmen were bona fide mass people, the equivalent of "the smoking gun." Although their presence creates this illusion, in actuality, the two airmen couldn't help Kaffee's case at all.

Theoretically, the airmen could've been *genuine* mass people. In this circumstance, the climax could've played out exactly the same way. (Kaffee would use them to unnerve Jessep to such a degree that Jessep would confess, negating the need to put them on the stand in the first place.)

Nevertheless, by going the extra mile, and transforming the airmen into

illusory mass people through misdirection, *A FEW GOOD MEN*, similar to *SILENCE*, provides an even more satisfying experience for audiences, who, in this particular situation, appreciate being deceived.

5) Fortify the antagonist with a human shield

If the protagonist storms the antagonist's hideout with lots of mass people, as previously mentioned, this tilts the scales in his favor. To even out the odds and keep the tension high, the antagonist, now cornered, can take a hostage to use as a human shield.

This countermeasure significantly enhances the antagonist's position. Because protagonists (and their mass people) are traditionally averse to collateral damage, even one hostage can render them ineffective.

To grant your protagonist a believable victory, you'll have to find a way to logically take the hostage out of the equation. Alternately, in a bold move, your protagonist could terminate the villain without injuring the hostage—the way Bryan Mills does in *TAKEN*.

Despite this tip, as a general rule, you shouldn't have to fortify your antagonists at this point in your story.

Can you guess why?

Your story, unfortunately, is already on life support.

If you have to go out of your way to strengthen your antagonist immediately prior to, or smack dab in the middle of, the climax, in most cases, he's not going to be that formidable a foe to begin with.

As a result, the “cat and mouse” game between him and the protagonist, developed throughout the middle of your story, is probably subpar. Audiences are likely to have disengaged and tuned out long before the climax even starts.

As long as he isn't a complete wimp, a protagonist who's initially weaker than his antagonist doesn't necessarily cause the same degree of damage. On the contrary, the protagonist's attempts to overcome incredible odds make for a compelling tale. Furthermore, the “underdog” factor increases audience sympathy, thereby deepening their emotional involvement.

In other words, even with a substantially weaker protagonist, the middle of your story can still captivate audiences and keep them interested enough to stick around for the end. To ensure that it doesn't disappoint, you must now find a way to strengthen him so he's on equal footing with his antagonist.

To accomplish this objective, you may adopt one of the suggestions discussed above. Perhaps, you'll employ other means at your disposal, such as:

- exposing disguises
- changing the setting
- paying off embedded setups
- restricting magic and other special powers

Because these options are better discussed in other contexts, we will explore them in greater depth in later chapters.

Rule of Engagement #7: Conflicts with Antagonists Must Be Resolved by the End of Your Story

Let's start with the first part of this rule of engagement. A character who comes in between your protagonist and his goal won't automatically ascend to antagonist status.

Here, quantity counts.

Your protagonist must engage with this opposing force *more than once* in order for the latter to be considered an antagonist. Otherwise, in most cases, this opposition is just an obstacle, a short-term problem which will cede way, never to bother your protagonist again.

But when an opposing force appears twice, and thus qualifies as a full-fledged antagonist, you have to resolve this conflict within the protagonist and antagonist's second encounter, or, alternatively, save it for the future.

If you neglect to do either, audiences will feel cheated. Instead of raving about your story, they'll be downright critical of it.

That's because you're violating the unwritten contract between you and your audience which states that, in exchange for the investment of their time and/or money, you're going to reward them with a *complete* experience.

A couple of pointers to keep in mind: naturally, you have more leeway when writing a series wherein each installment is *not* a self-contained unit. (Although, it should be noted, some audience members abhor cliffhangers, so it can still get iffy.)

Even though it's pretty standard for the bad guy to be killed at the end of an action movie, resolving the conflict between your protagonist and his antagonist doesn't necessarily have to end with the latter's death.

Among other possibilities, your hero could let the antagonist live now... knowing that the antagonist will die of starvation later on. Alternately, your hero could believe he has killed his antagonist...who actually manages to survive to menace your hero in a sequel.

Also, you're unlikely to forget to resolve the conflict with strong antagonistic forces. It's the ones of weak to moderate strength, what I regard as second-tier antagonists, which tend to get lost in the shuffle as you rush to wrap up all loose ends by the end of your story.

This is one gripe frequently lobbied against INCEPTION. At the beginning of the film, audiences learn that Cobol Engineering hired Cobb to infiltrate Saito's dreams. When Cobb fails, Saito hints that the unscrupulous corporation might even kill Cobb's dream architect.

That's the first presentation of Cobol. If that had been the only one, audiences could just chalk it up to setup. Only later on, Cobol reappears in a significant way.

Cobb learns the company has put a bounty on his head, a state of affairs which threatens his overall goal and paves the way for a suspenseful chase sequence through the streets of Mombasa.

Although Cobol is not the worst of Cobb's problems, this second presentation reinforces the perception that the corporation is ruthless, vindictive, and powerful.

In short, a force to reckon with.

This, in turn, creates audience anticipation for a final encounter which will bring this conflict to a close.

Unfortunately, that doesn't happen. Cobol never reappears, leaving Cobb's conflict with this antagonist unresolved. While this flaw detracts from the ending somewhat, it produces a negative consequence that's even worse: it makes Cobb's earlier encounters with this antagonist come across as artificial.

Oh so conveniently, Cobol Engineering was right there when writer and director Christopher Nolan needed it to inject more thrills into his story, but was summarily jettisoned when he didn't.

Like artificial sweeteners, artificial conflict leaves a bitter taste in the mouths of audiences, marring their experience, and resulting in poor reviews and lost sales.

To the film's credit, upon first viewing, there's so much going on, audiences are unlikely to notice Cobol's vanishing act. They'd probably register this omission only after watching the film a second time.

But in a less unique story universe, the oversight would've been readily apparent and detected immediately. As a consequence, audiences would experience a nagging sense of incompleteness, and walk away from it feeling dissatisfied.

Luckily, it's easy to avoid this problem. Just double check that you resolve all the conflicts with each of your antagonists!

Common options include:

- at the end of the second act
- during the beginning of the third act, before diving into the climax proper
- in the midst of the climax itself
- within the resolution

That last possibility raises a good question: what's the difference between the climax and the resolution?

The answer varies, depending on whom you ask. Semantically, it gets a little tricky because even though the climax resolves the central conflict of your story, it's not the same thing as the resolution.

The way I see it, the climax consists of the steps the protagonist takes to bring the conflict with his antagonist to a close. The outcome of this final encounter is the resolution.

Resolutions can be brief or extended, with the latter being the commoner option. Audiences frequently get to see a detailed picture of the changes the climax's outcome has wrought in the protagonist's everyday life.

To resolve the conflict between your protagonist and a second-tier antagonist, you can "stuff" their final encounter into the resolution, after the central story conflict has been resolved (like the arguments in the helicopter between Peabody and SALT).

Using this tactic usually gives these climactic steps the overall feel of a resolution, especially if the outcome of the encounter is a foregone conclusion. This is sometimes the case in romantic subplots, wherein the very presence of the hero on the heroine's doorstep indicates a happy ending.

Think of Officer Rhodes in *BRIDESMAIDS*. When he appears in the wedding venue's parking lot at the end of the film, before even a single word of dialogue is spoken, it's clear that, henceforth, he and Annie are going to be a couple.

Alternately, you can show the outcome of your protagonist's final encounter with a second-tier antagonist during the resolution, without showing the climactic steps taken to reach this outcome. For instance, in *AVATAR*, audiences never see Jake ordering Parker to leave Pandora. They just know that having been banished, Parker's about to depart from the planet.

Finally, there's one more option on the table: you can resolve the conflict between your protagonist and a second-tier antagonist by—credibly—transforming the antagonist into an ally prior to, or during, the climax.

A third wheel nemesis, for instance, frequently will shed his antagonistic role and become a valuable climactic ally. If your protagonist-third wheel nemesis clashes are well-developed, like the ones between Foley and Bogomil in *BEVERLY HILLS COP*, this transformation can be particularly satisfying.

Ideally, both audiences and your protagonist will be made aware of this second-tier antagonist's metamorphosis. This will give audiences the strongest sense of closure.

However, technically, as long as audiences know about the antagonist's change in attitude, even if the protagonist remains in the dark, you've made good on your promise to deliver a complete experience.

Rule of Engagement #8: The Mystery Rule

Actually, this rule of engagement is more than a basic guideline.

It's the core of the climax itself.

As such, it requires two entire chapters to explain in full. Turn the page and take a peek...

2 Criteria at the Core of the Climax Which Are Crucial to Fulfill to Avoid Disappointed Audiences (But Which, Oddly, Are Often Overlooked)

After you've built a sturdy foundation for your story climax, it's time to work on the climax itself.

Specifically, it's time to fulfill the eighth rule of engagement: your protagonist must directly confront his true antagonist.

The adjectives “direct” and “true” weren't randomly included to make this rule of engagement appear fancier.

They are the two criteria at the core of the climax; they are its essence.

Neglect them, and your climax will be constructed with flimsy raw material, unlikely to thrill or delight.

Unfortunately, although it may seem straightforward on the surface, it's not always easy to fulfill these criteria in a way which truly pays off your narrative debts.

To avoid common hazards—and unhappy audiences—keep on reading!

Core Criterion #1: The Confrontation Is Direct

In one scene in *IN THE LINE OF FIRE*, Secret Service agent Frank Horrigan is at a bar, flirting with a female co-agent. When she asks him why he never wears sunglasses when he's standing post, Frank replies, "I like the wackos to see the whites of my eyes."

This is what your story climax is all about.

For this pivotal plot point to thrill and delight, it's essential that your protagonist is in a position to see the whites of the eyes of his antagonist (who, incidentally, won't always be a wacko!).

Take this advice both literally and figuratively.

At some point during the climax, your protagonist physically needs to be in the same room as his antagonist. Additionally, your protagonist should be fully aware of his antagonist's true nature.

Under certain circumstances, this can be difficult to orchestrate, especially when:

- a preponderance of technology dominates the climax
- your hero is perpetrating a major ruse
- your villain is pretending to be a nice guy

In a nutshell, if your story concept heavily relies on some form of technology or contains some element of disguise, at the climax, make sure that neither aspect prevents your hero from directly confronting his true antagonist.

To see what I mean, let's examine specific examples, starting with technology...

When Technology Takes Over

Throughout your story, your protagonist may communicate with the heroine, a sidekick, or even his antagonist through various forms of technology, including texts, emails, Skype chats, walkie-talkies, or telephone conversations.

But at the climax (for a part of it at least), these forms of technology must fall by the wayside.

It's time for your hero to confront his antagonist without any technological barriers between them.

If barriers are present, even if you do resolve the central story conflict and tie up loose ends, you'll be paying off your narrative debts with counterfeit currency.

That's because audiences are expecting you to use your ingenuity to credibly bring your protagonist and antagonist together in the same room—much more difficult to orchestrate than a phone conversation or a text—and much more entertaining to watch.

It's like breaking up with a significant other in real life. Anyone can end a relationship on the phone.

It takes real courage to end it in person, where you can be subjected to your ex-partner's anger, sadness, and pain.

Similarly, even a writer of subpar capability can resolve the central story conflict through indirect interaction. It takes more skill to engineer a direct encounter, the kind of skill audiences invested their time and/or money to see on full display.

If your climax is already strong in other respects, orchestrating a direct encounter at its conclusion will strengthen it even further. If your climax is standing on shaky legs as it is, neglecting to do this will draw even more attention to its weaknesses, thereby disappointing audiences further.

Look at *DAVE* and *THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT*. Set in the political arena, both films feature the president of the United States (or, in *DAVE*'s case, his

lookalike) as the hero. Additionally, in both climaxes, each president makes an impassioned televised speech before a live audience—*neither of which includes his antagonist!*

Throughout DAVE, the presidential lookalike has been battling wits with the president's slick chief of staff, Bob Alexander. Although Dave's climactic speech brilliantly ends their political duel for good, Bob is not there, in the House Chamber, to witness it in person. Bob watches it from afar, from the comfort of his own apartment.

Similarly, in THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT, Andrew Shepherd's climactic broadcast speech is a bold political move designed to regain the affection of his amorous opponent, Sydney. But she cannot be found amongst the crowd of reporters eagerly devouring the president's words in the briefing room.

In other words, at the climax, neither hero looks into the whites of his antagonist's eyes.

To be fair to these films, even though they paid off their narrative debts with counterfeit cash, their endings are still enjoyable. Dave's solution to his predicament is both surprising and yet inevitable, traits of the perfect ending which Aristotle described more than two thousand years ago. The cutaway to Bob's apartment—completely emptied of supporters after Dave reveals Bob's corruption—is priceless.

Likewise, in THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT, it's satisfying to witness Shepherd finally engage in the character debate he had been so steadfastly avoiding. The dialogue is trademark Sorkin, with the text cleverly challenging Shepherd's political rival, while the subtext pleads Shepherd's case with his amorous opponent.

But in most cases, the lack of a direct climactic encounter would've been much more damaging. Although DAVE's and PRESIDENT's climactic sequences manage to satisfy, think about how much *stronger* their endings would've been and how much *more* they would've delighted audiences if each hero's true antagonist, Bob and Sydney respectively, had been in the same room as the hero at the climax.

In a screenplay, this arrangement would have given the actors an opportunity to interact with, or "act off of," each other in ways which were precluded by their

physical separation.

In a novel, you don't have to worry about giving actors room to work with. Nevertheless, physical contact between your characters, or even merely hinting at its possibility, will make your climax much more exciting and dynamic.

For example, what if the setting had been changed in DAVE? He didn't confront Bob while safely ensconced inside the House Chamber, but instead, at a political debate arranged by some media pundit.

Can you picture it?

Both are on stage, having to answer increasingly more pointed questions from the debate host. At first, it seems that Bob is eviscerating Dave, who, as in the film version, agrees that all allegations of financial wrongdoing are true.

Bob gloats. His supporters in the crowd cheer raucously. But then, again as in the film version, Dave drops his bombshell: Bob was involved in the financial scandal too.

And Dave has proof.

Because Bob is in the same room as Dave, this is where our version can start to deviate from the film. As one possibility, Bob could become so incensed he could lunge at Dave, and get in a blow or two, before he is carted off by Secret Service.

Or, as an alternative, Bob could pounce onto the director of communications, who had provided Dave with evidence of Bob's wrongdoing.

That cutaway? The one to Bob's empty apartment in the theatrical release? We can keep it in there, just with a slight modification. It would zoom in on the seats from where Bob's supporters once raucously cheered: they're abandoned now.

After depicting Bob's histrionics, we can return back to Dave. He may say a few more lines, perhaps invite the vice president onto the stage, and then, as in the film, fake a stroke to make a strategic exit during the ensuing hubbub.

We can apply a similar solution to orchestrate a direct confrontation between

the hero and his true antagonist in *THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT*. Instead of using the briefing room as the background, which isolates Shepherd from his amorous opponent, we could set his climactic speech at a charity fundraiser, for, let's say, childhood literacy.

This could easily and credibly position Shepherd in the same room as Sydney—as well as with his political rival. (Although, it should be mentioned, the rival isn't so essential since he isn't Shepherd's true antagonist. We'll explore this topic in much more depth in the next chapter.)

If we didn't want to go through the trouble of changing the setting in *PRESIDENT*, at the very least, we could've had Shepherd's chief of staff (who, incidentally, possesses stronger moral fiber than Bob Alexander) arrange for Sydney to attend the president's press conference.

In the middle of his impassioned speech, Shepherd would finally realize her presence, stop delivering his lines to the press cameras, and instead, direct them at Sydney herself, making the scene feel more intimate, (as befits a romance).

Note: in the film, Shepherd and Sydney do converse in person *after* the president's speech. However, this follow-up scene in the Oval Office has the overall feel of a resolution, even though, technically, the first part of it could be considered part of the climax.

The changes we've made to both films are simple. Minor really. But they have major impact.

They're exciting.

They're dramatic.

They pay off accrued narrative debts with genuine dollars.

The Special Case of Saving the Day

If you're writing an action movie or a thriller where the hero "saves the day," you have to be especially careful. Sometimes, your hero may be able to thwart the villain's nefarious plan without any direct engagement with the villain himself.

This is another manifestation of not paying off your narrative debts in full, even when, on the surface, it seems like you are. Naturally, audiences want to see your hero achieve victory. When he does eventually save the day, you pay off one of the biggest narrative debts in your story.

But, that's not all audiences have been looking forward to. *They've also been anticipating that final confrontation where the hero, to be blunt, kicks the villain's butt.*

If you fail to provide them with that encounter, even when you resolve the central story conflict and wrap up all loose ends, you still won't be paying off all of your narrative debts.

Your ending probably won't be completely ruined, but it won't be as satisfying as it could've been—a state of affairs, which, unsurprisingly, yields unsatisfactory results.

If your climax had delighted readers more, maybe your self-published novel would've accrued one hundred five-star reviews by now.

If it had thrilled studio executives more, maybe this particular draft of your screenplay would've already been sold, or, assuming it had been sold and produced, would've enjoyed greater box office success.

In one of *SPEED*'s commentaries, screenwriter Graham Yost expresses mixed feelings towards the film's climax. For him, once Jack saves the hostages on the bus and finally gets to kiss Annie, that was the natural ending of the story.

The studio, on the other hand, felt that too much time had been spent on the bus. They wanted to “open up” the story by transporting it to a new location. That, apparently, was the genesis for the secondary climactic sequence on the Los Angeles subway.

I think the studio made a fair point. But, I also think there's a bigger issue at play here. During Act One, Jack has an extensive (and memorable) confrontation with the villain, Payne. For the entirety of Act Two, however, they never engage with one another directly.

Payne taunts and mocks Jack a number of times, but all of these exchanges take place over the phone, never face-to-face. Granted, Jack is also dealing with the

effects of Payne's handiwork—the bomb on the bus—but again, this is an indirect interaction.

If Payne hadn't specifically targeted Annie, if the story had ended where Yost apparently had wanted it to, then, except for their Act One interaction, *the hero never would've directly encountered the villain at all.*

SPEED was an unexpected hit, raking in \$350 million worldwide. In my opinion, that final direct confrontation between Jack and Payne played a major role in the film's juggernaut success.

That's because it paid off accrued narrative debts in full—and then some.

In addition to providing audiences with the hero-villain showdown they had been looking forward to, it increased the action quotient, fulfilling genre requirements to a greater degree. Furthermore, it also made the stakes more personal for Jack and elongated the climax (two benefits we'll discuss in greater detail in later chapters).

If you're writing a story in the vein of SPEED, it's not enough for your hero to stop the villain and save the day. For your ending to truly thrill and delight, you must go beyond that, and find a way for your hero to directly confront the bad guy.

How Much Eye-to-Eye Time Is Enough?

Generally speaking, the more time your protagonist and antagonist spend together in the same place, the stronger your climax will be.

But, as always, context plays a role.

Your hero's direct encounter with his true antagonist can be effective without being lengthy. By the same token, even if present, its impact may be diluted by a preponderance of other indirect interactions. It all depends on what else transpires at the climax.

Take MINORITY REPORT. Unfortunately, the ending doesn't live up to its thrilling beginning. For one thing, the film ends ambiguously. It's not clear if the climax and resolution actually took place or were just visions from John Anderton's imagination.

The distinction is important because of genre. If the climax and resolution are supposed to be taken at face value, then the ending doesn't fulfill the genre requirements of a film noir.

At the same time, if they're supposed to be a figment of Anderton's imagination, then the finale would disappoint movie-goers who had been, noir notwithstanding, anticipating a happy ending.

For our purposes, we're going to set aside that particular debate and focus on the actions of the climax itself. Whether real or imagined, during much of it, Anderton doesn't directly deal with his true antagonist, Lamar Burgess.

Initially, Anderton makes contact with Burgess on the phone and accuses Burgess of killing Anne Lively. Following this exchange, Anderton plays a video, showing exactly how Burgess committed this crime, on screens hung in a crowded reception hall where Burgess is ironically celebrating his promotion to director of a new national "Precrime" program.

Sure, at the tail end of the climax, Anderton and Burgess square off, face-to-face. But this direct encounter is somewhat offset by the phone call and the video playback which precede it.

To see how these technological barriers weaken MINORITY REPORT's climax, compare it to the grand finale of THE FUGITIVE. Despite their differences in concept and genre, these films share remarkably similar plots, down to a third wheel nemesis (Witwer vs Gerard), an archvillain behind the nemesis (Burgess vs Nichols), and the hero's attempts to expose the archvillain at a private reception (promotion party vs medical conference).

However, in contrast to MINORITY REPORT, unlike Anderton, hero Richard Kimble doesn't hurl accusations against his transgressor over the phone or through a projector screen.

Nope.

He stands in front of Nichols—and before the assembled crowd—and makes these accusations in person.

Because Kimble is able to look into the whites of the archvillain's eyes as Kimble publicly exposes the archvillain's crimes, this scene is a hundred times

more powerful than its REPORT counterpart.

Admittedly, the preponderance of the technological barriers doesn't, on its own, wreck REPORT's climax. Additional factors, like the noir genre issue, as well as others, contribute too.

Here's one of them: the content of Anderton's climactic dialogue. It's primarily exposition, an explanation of how and why Burgess tried to get away with murder.

Exposition almost always slows down the pace of your story because you have to stop the plot to make your explanations. Hence, the climax—where your story is supposed to feel like it's hurtling towards its finish line—is the worst time to ladle out exposition. (That is, unless you're using it to give audiences respite between two action-heavy or suspense-filled sequences.)

This was not the case in MINORITY REPORT. In this story, including so much exposition was the antithesis of thrilling, and made its climax feel...well...rather anticlimactic.

Overreliance on technology only compounds this effect. If Anderton had at least delivered this expository material in person, while standing in the same room as Burgess, the confrontation would've been more dramatic, and audiences would've perhaps been more forgiving of the molasses-like pace.

Flirting with Deceit and Disguises

Of course, technology isn't the only thing which can preclude a direct encounter between your protagonist and his true antagonist. Disguises are equally effective, creating a barrier rooted in pretense, rather than in technology.

Either character may be wearing a literal mask (like the prosthetic visage Daniel Hillard adopts to pass himself off as MRS DOUBTFIRE), or one that's more metaphorical in nature (Lucy's false identity in *WHILE YOU WERE SLEEPING*, Dr Nichols's false friendship in *THE FUGITIVE*).

But, at the climax, just like the way technological barriers must fall by the wayside, the masks must come off.

The protagonist must confront his antagonist, with both possessing full knowledge of the other's true identity or intentions.

This not only fulfills the essence of the climax, it also keeps the protagonist and antagonist well-matched.

If, for example, the hero doesn't know that his trusted friend is really a treacherous antagonist, then the latter can easily stab the hero in the back.

Game over.

But when the antagonist's true nature is exposed, he's weakened. He can't hide behind his mask and take hero by surprise. Now, the hero has a fighting chance to win.

When the hero engages in false pretenses, and his true nature is exposed, he too, is weakened, putting him on more equal footing with his antagonist.

For instance, let's say the hero has been pursuing a love interest, who's starting to reciprocate his feelings. By conveying these feelings to him, she's naked and vulnerable.

The same, however, can't be said for him. He can still use his disguise as a protective mechanism. But when his mask is removed, he will be just as naked

and vulnerable as she is—the only way to earn her love for real.

Let's dive into more specifics...

When the Hero Plays Deceiver

If your protagonist has been the one operating under false pretenses, there are three basic approaches you can use to craft the climax of your story.

Take a look:

1) Give all the advantages to the antagonist

In this approach, the protagonist adopts a disguise to catch the antagonist. While the antagonist knows the hero's true identity from the beginning, the hero is in the dark with regards to the antagonist's identity.

By the end of the second act, the hero discovers the antagonist's true nature, and the climax proceeds in much the same fashion as if the hero had known the identity of his antagonist all along.

One way to create more complications for your hero at the climax (and thus better entertain your audience) is through other characters who remain clueless about both the antagonist's true intentions and the hero's true identity.

MISS CONGENIALITY is a great example of this. Pageant director Kathy Morningside has always known Gracie Hart is an undercover FBI agent. It takes Gracie until the end of Act Two to realize that Kathy is the culprit trying to sabotage the Miss United States beauty pageant.

At the climax, significant (and humorous) difficulties arise because the contestants, on the other hand, are still clueless about both Kathy's evil plot and Gracie's plans to foil it.

2) Unmask your protagonist at the end of Act Two

In this approach, the hero's antagonist is a "mark," someone who's been completely fooled by the hero's false identity. However, the hero will be unmasked (or will unmask himself), at the end of the second act, as part of his trough of hell.

Naturally, the mark (oftentimes a female amorous opponent) doesn't take too kindly to being deceived. She's so wounded by the hero's betrayal that she doesn't want to talk to him at all.

Your climax will likely balance showing the direct confrontation itself with showing the various obstacles, generated by the heroine's obstinacy, which the hero must overcome to directly plead his case in the first place.

3) Save the big reveal for the climax

Sometimes, the unmasking of the protagonist is actually part of the climax. Because audiences look forward to this scene, delaying the reveal until the climax is a great way to keep them turning the pages of your story.

Since you're making them wait this long, when you finally make your big reveal, go all the way.

Make the unmasking feel climactic by:

- extending the scene for as long as you can
- choosing a special date or occasion as its backdrop
- including plenty of witnesses

Because the protagonist and his antagonist must confront each other directly—with no disguises between them—unmasking the protagonist as part of the climax will always precipitate a secondary scene in which both resolve their conflict as their true selves.

Sometimes, the protagonist will be the one pursuing his amorous opponent in this follow-up scene (as in *TOOTSIE*). Alternately, if the protagonist has given up and has no expectation of being forgiven (as in *WHILE YOU WERE SLEEPING*), the antagonist may be the one doing the pursuit.

Regardless of who originates it, this follow-up scene tends to be shorter (and more sentimental) than the big reveal.

When the Villain Plays Nice

In several action movies and thrillers, it's not the hero who engages in false

pretenses, but the villain.

Unfortunately, the hero is completely fooled by the villain and mistakenly believes a) the villain is his friend, and b) another individual is the one responsible for the hero's ordeals.

In these kinds of "villain behind the villain" stories, it can be tricky to keep each character straight. For the sake of simplicity, let's call the true villain, the architect of the hero's misfortunes, the archvillain. As for the other guy, the one who visibly stands in between the hero and his goal, we'll refer to him as the surface antagonist.

This character might be a henchman of the archvillain, merely carrying out orders, but not "the brains" of the operation.

Alternately, this character might be someone else with entirely different motives, such as an agent of law enforcement (who, as we discussed earlier, may function as a third wheel nemesis). In this scenario, oftentimes, this surface antagonist will eventually transform into an ally.

Even though the hero has been fooled by the archvillain for a good portion of your story, by the time the climax starts, or, in rare cases, midway through it, the archvillain's true nature must be revealed, paving the way for the hero to confront him directly, with no disguises between them.

If you were telling a "villain behind the villain" kind of story, like many writers, you might be inclined to make the big reveal at the end of the second act. This would delay your surprise plot twist for as long as possible, while still giving audiences enough time to process the revelation before the climax begins.

Although this can create a thrilling plot twist, you have to carefully assess how associated storytelling decisions will affect audience response to your climax. To keep the surprise going, you may be tempted to throw audiences off the scent by:

- keeping the archvillain at the fringes of your story, barely allotting him any screentime (or novel pages) at all
- giving the archvillain more screentime, but "front-loading" his scenes

into the beginning of your story

- making the archvillain's scenes pale in comparison to the hero's clashes with the surface antagonist

While all of these choices would help maintain the surprise, they come with a major drawback: they can make it difficult for audiences to drum up enthusiasm for the climactic match, once it finally begins.

Basically, the more time audiences spend with the archvillain in total, and the more time they spend with him while knowing that he is the real architect of the hero's painful predicament, the more emotionally invested they'll be in the climax.

By failing to follow this principle, MINORITY REPORT nets another strike against its climax. The archvillain, Lamar Burgess, enjoys very little screentime before audiences learn that he is the architect behind Anderton's troubles.

Furthermore, the scenes Burgess does have are front-loaded into the first third of the film. Sixty-five minutes (!) transpire between the sequence which reveals that Burgess is the archvillain and his last appearance in the story.

Taken together, these factors make it difficult for audiences to feel very strongly about the climactic showdown between Burgess and Anderton. Sure, audiences are rooting for Anderton to succeed.

The problem is that they're not rooting that hard for Burgess to fail.

They can't be bothered to dislike him that much, not when they've spent so little time with him, period, and moreover, for most of that duration, they weren't aware he was the real bad guy.

The preponderance of technology and exposition, which we discussed earlier, compounds this weakness. As a result of being too indirect (on multiple levels), this climax fails to thrill.

So, if you're writing a story in the vein of MINORITY REPORT, how could you craft a stronger, more satisfying ending? Here's one solution: the "stand by your man" method.

More details, below.

Stand by Your Man

As you may've guessed, the name of this method was inspired by the classic Tammy Wynette song, which advises women "to show the world that you love your man."

In your "villain behind the villain" story, your archvillain should pay heed to this advice and show the world how much he "loves" your hero by standing up for the hero in some way. (Bonus points if the archvillain expresses his support to the surface antagonist, the way Dr Nichols does in *THE FUGITIVE*.)

This technique not only makes your forthcoming reveal more of a surprise, it also creates a more effective climax. Here's why: the archvillain's support fools audiences into trusting him. When you reveal that the archvillain is actually the real bad guy, audiences will feel duped by him.

And nobody likes being duped.

Consequently, audiences will feel angry for allowing the archvillain to pull the wool over their eyes. This anger heightens their dislike of him, intensifying their emotional response at the climax.

In other words, because they're upset that they didn't see through the archvillain's deceit, irrespective of their goodwill towards the hero, they will root even harder for the archvillain to fail, (usually with a force which is proportional to the extent they originally trusted the archvillain).

Granted, the success of this method depends on other factors. Going back to *MINORITY REPORT*, Burgess does stand up to Witwer and claim that he, Burgess, doesn't want to see Anderton get hurt.

The effect, however, is undercut by two other circumstances. For one thing, Burgess's support isn't stalwart throughout; a few scenes prior, he encouraged Anderton to turn himself in.

Secondly, and even more critically, because Burgess is relegated to the shadows for most of the film, despite his faux solicitousness (and egregious crimes), it's still difficult to feel that intensely about him at the climax.

You might be thinking that it's easy to create a “stand by your man” scene when your hero, like Kimble or Anderton, is framed for a crime he didn't commit.

And you'd be right.

If your hero isn't trapped in a web of false accusations, it can be difficult to think of ways for the archvillain to express his staunch support for the hero.

Difficult, but not impossible.

Look at *MONSTERS, INC.* Although Sulley is not framed for murder, the story follows the classic “villain behind the villain” model. Following convention, Sulley's boss, Mr Waternoose, is exposed as the story's archvillain at the end of the second act.

At the story's beginning, Waternoose introduces Sulley's character, calling him “the best scarer” in Monstropolis. Later, Waternoose will rely on Sulley's skill to train a new crop of employees.

While Waternoose doesn't affirm Sulley's innocence, he demonstrates his support for Sulley by affirming Sulley's talent. This indicates Waternoose's faith in Sulley, which in turn, inspires audiences to trust Waternoose and overlook his slightly creepy demeanor.

If this example still doesn't help you devise a suitable “stand by your man” scene in your screenplay or novel, you can always investigate other options... like the early bird special...

The Early Bird Special

As I mentioned in the introduction to this writing guide, the trough of hell is a term I've coined to describe the end of the second act. As its name implies, this is the spot to put your hero through hell of all types—including the revelation that his trusted ally is actually a treacherous archvillain.

With the “early bird special” method, you move up this key revelation so that it occurs sooner than you perhaps originally intended.

Instead of saving this revelation for the end of a lengthy trough of hell sequence, use it at the sequence's beginning. If you're feeling daring, you

might even make this reveal as early on as the midpoint of your story.

Since audiences will be in full knowledge of the archvillain's true identity, they will be in a superior position to the hero, to another key character, or both. This state of affairs should open up several new possibilities for the latter half of the second act (known in screenwriting parlance as Act 2B), a good portion of which will probably involve some sort of dramatic irony.

Indeed, the “early bird special” is quite advantageous. It overcomes most, if not all, of the flaws we discussed earlier. Because you've already let audiences in on the secret, you can bring the archvillain to the forefront of your story without worrying that you're ruining the surprise.

Furthermore, when you delay the reveal until the end of Act Two, audiences only have a brief window, between the reveal and the climax, to really cultivate their dislike of the archvillain. That's not a lot of time to prime their emotional pumps against him.

In contrast, when you make the reveal early on, audiences have more time to build up their dislike against the archvillain. The sooner you make the reveal, the longer they'll know he's the bad guy, and the harder they'll root against him by the time the climax rolls around. Basically, you'll be providing them with a deeper emotional experience.

If you unveil your surprise as early as the midpoint, you might wonder how you're going to keep audience interest at peak levels at the end of Act Two, where it naturally tends to wane—and where your surprise was originally scripted to occur.

Remember, to build up audience dislike against the villain and to mine the power of dramatic irony, it's only essential to make the big reveal *to audiences* early on.

Thus, to end Act Two on a suitably hellacious note, the archvillain could threaten the hero, finally revealing his true colors, thereby devastating the hero.

If the hero is already aware of the archvillain's treachery, then someone precious to the hero, who like the hero, trusted the archvillain, could make this chilling discovery instead. (Molly, in *GHOST*, is a good example.)

As far as I can tell, the “early bird special” comes with lots of benefits—and no drawbacks. Surprisingly, however, it’s not employed that frequently.

I suspect that writers—myself included—vastly underestimate the power of dramatic irony. They initially place a premium on the power of surprise, and hence, like to keep audiences in the dark for as long as possible.

The more you write, though, the more you’ll begin to appreciate—and maximize—the former’s potential.

That’s not to say dramatic irony will always be the best option for your screenplay or novel. I don’t think it would’ve been particularly effective in *THE BODYGUARD*, for example.

But, in some circumstances, mining dramatic irony might be just the ticket to transform your story into something extraordinary—if only you take care to look.

* * *

In sum, if something feels off about your third act; if you’ve received studio notes which vaguely criticize the climax; or if readers have, through their reviews, indicated ambivalence towards your ending, start by examining the extent to which your protagonist *directly* engages with his antagonist, without any technological barriers or disguises between them.

Does he do it enough? Does he do it at all?

Including or extending a direct encounter between these two major characters should minimize the odds that audiences will be disappointed by the climax of your screenplay or novel...taking you a step closer to a huge spec sale or to your hundredth five-star review.

Admittedly, orchestrating this direct encounter is just one half of the equation. Its effectiveness is predicated on the assumption that you fulfill the second criterion at the core of the climax: your protagonist must directly confront his *true* antagonist.

What makes an antagonist true?

To find out, turn the page!

Core Criterion #2: The Confrontation Is with the True Antagonist

If your story only has one antagonist, then that's the true antagonist of your tale. Simple enough.

But, more than likely, things aren't going to be that straightforward.

As mentioned in rule of engagement #4, to create a feature-length film of sufficient complexity or to sustain the length of an 80,000-word novel, your protagonist is probably going to grapple with multiple antagonists.

Assuming it's well-executed, the climactic confrontation with one of them, out of this set, is going to give audiences the most satisfaction to experience.

That's your true antagonist.

Make sure you deliver!

You might be thinking that this definition is rather "loosey-goosey," too subjective to have much use. Don't worry. We're going to get into the practical stuff next.

Nevertheless, the guidelines discussed in this chapter are all designed with this end goal in mind. If you're deep in the editing trenches, and you're racked by indecision, bring it back to audience satisfaction, listen to your instincts, and you should be fine.

Okay, time to get down to brass tacks.

In practical terms, to deliver audiences the most satisfying experience possible, you must show how your protagonist conquers his true antagonist, whether conquering is defined as winning the heart of an amorous opponent, besting a professional rival, or vanquishing the villain.

You can't give the hero's actions short shrift. You can't shunt them off-screen; you can't squish them into the resolution (as previously described by rule of engagement #7).

You've got to show audiences the steps the hero takes to succeed.

All of them.

Okay, perhaps not all of them. But the vast majority of them.

If you don't, audiences will feel that your grand finale is lacking a certain something, even if they can't precisely articulate what that certain something is.

Additionally, your protagonist must be the one who takes the definitive action which brings this conflict to a close. Another character can't bail him out at the last minute, when things are at their ugliest, and it seems like your protagonist is tip-toeing around the precipices of failure.

Furthermore, because of the principle of escalation, barring a few exceptions, this is the confrontation that you want to end your climax with.

To quickly recap: the confrontation between your protagonist and the true antagonist must be shown on-screen (or on the page), must be resolved by the protagonist, and ideally, occurs at the tail end of the entire climactic sequence.

The definitive action and the principle of escalation are two topics we'll revisit in later chapters. For now, we're going to focus our attention on the true antagonist's identity.

To determine who's at the top of your antagonist hierarchy, you'll have to evaluate—in conjunction—three key determinants:

- story weight
- power
- genre

Let's take a closer look...

True Antagonist Determinant #1: Story Weight

For the most part, story weight is a matter of prominence: which plotline you've developed the most extensively, the one to which most pages of your screenplay or novel are dedicated. The antagonist who challenges the protagonist in *this* plotline is likely to be the true antagonist of your tale.

Sometimes, however, plotlines (with different antagonists) are given comparable prominence. It might not be easy to determine which one takes precedence, and correspondingly, which antagonist is the one audiences really want to see the protagonist square off against at the climax.

In this case, there are two other “tiebreaker” elements to consider: positioning and value.

Basically, positioning is where a particular plotline is concentrated within your screenplay or novel. Generally speaking, if two plotlines share equal prominence, the one which is closer to the climax in terms of positioning carries more story weight.

As a generic example, let's say you're writing a story with a professional plot and a romantic plot. The first act sets up both plots. The first half of the second act (known in screenwriting parlance as Act 2A) focuses on the professional plotline. But, at the midpoint, the focus of the story shifts in a new direction. The romantic plot takes over during Act 2B.

Due to this structural choice, the two plotlines are comparable in prominence. Nevertheless, because Act 2B is closer to the climax in terms of positioning, usually, the true antagonist will be the one who challenged the hero during Act 2B (in this case, an amorous opponent), not the one who challenged the hero during Act 2A.

Value is important too. If plotlines share equal prominence, and are interwoven together in such a way that one doesn't take precedence due to positioning, compare the degree to which the protagonist values success in each endeavor. The true antagonist, then, will be the one who challenges the protagonist in the plotline whose outcome the protagonist values more.

To clarify, let's move beyond the generic and examine some specific examples.

In *BRUCE ALMIGHTY*, Bruce's desire to best Evan, a professional rival, dominates the majority of Act 2A. However, after the midpoint, during Act 2B, Bruce's relationship with Grace, his amorous opponent, takes over the story. Plus, due to his ordeals, Bruce has come to value his relationship with Grace over his professional aspirations.

Hence, due to positioning and value, Grace is Bruce's true antagonist. Audiences want to see Bruce make amends to her more than they want to see him apologize to Evan.

The climax satisfies this desire by a) spending more time resolving Bruce's relationship with Grace, and b) ending the climax with this particular plotline. The reverse—spending more time resolving the rivalry with Evan and ending with the professional plotline—would've felt anticlimactic and dissatisfying.

Like *BRUCE ALMIGHTY*, in *ABOUT A BOY*, a romantic relationship between the hero and his amorous opponent dominates a significant portion of Act 2B. Once he meets Rachel, Will is completely smitten, and will do anything he can to keep her in his life.

Nonetheless, despite the intensity of his feelings and despite its dominance during Act 2B, Will's relationship with Rachel is eclipsed by his friendship with Marcus. Unlike Rachel, who was first introduced during Act 2B, Marcus has been there right from the beginning, and thus, has accrued more story weight.

Additionally, at the end of the second act, when Will loses both of them, being alienated from Marcus bothers Will a lot more. In Will's own words, "There was only one thing that meant something to me. Marcus. He was the only thing that meant something to me."

While Rachel is present at the climax, she's not really a part of it. Will's actions are all about trying to win back Marcus's affection, not Rachel's. In fact, audiences never see Will trying to woo back Rachel at all. They only know this conflict has been resolved, not because of the climax, but because of Rachel's appearance in the resolution.

This approach works because Marcus is the true antagonist of the story. Audiences had to see what Will did to convince Marcus to give Will another chance. If they hadn't—if Will's reconciliation with Marcus had been shown

only through the resolution and not through the climax—audiences likely would've felt cheated.

Since Rachel is, in comparison to Marcus, a second-tier antagonist, audiences can be satisfied just by knowing what happened to her and Will. They don't need to see the exact steps he took to repair their rift. Incidentally, this is a good technique to implement if resolving a particular conflict with a second-tier antagonist is consuming too many pages and/or is wrecking the momentum of your grand finale.

To conclude this discussion, let's take a look at BRIDESMAIDS. Annie's afraid that by getting married, Lillian is moving on, leaving their friendship behind. Due to this insecurity, Annie competes with Helen, another member of Lillian's bridal party.

In our terminology, Lillian would be an amorous opponent whose affection Annie is desperate to keep, while Helen is a personal rival whom Annie is desperate to outshine.

Who, then, is Annie's true antagonist?

That's hard to say. Both women share comparable prominence. Most of Helen's scenes also include Lillian (and vice versa). Since Annie and Lillian's friendship is on solid ground for the first half of the movie, Helen is the stronger antagonistic force.

However, Helen only matters at all *because of* Lillian. Thus, Lillian has more value.

In this case, the ABOUT A BOY method wouldn't have worked very well. The most satisfying ending to BRIDESMAIDS would show how Annie resolves the conflicts with both Helen and Lillian, and not relegate her reconciliation with Lillian to the resolution. Happily, this is exactly what the film did.

True Antagonist Determinant #2: Power

In addition to story weight, to determine the true antagonist of your screenplay or novel, you should also examine each antagonist's level of power.

Typically, the true antagonist will be the one who:

- possesses the most authority
- exudes the most menace
- contributes the most to the protagonist's problems

This list seems pretty straightforward, doesn't it?

For the most part, it is. But, there are three circumstances where it can get a little tricky. Let's examine these problem spots in closer detail:

Power Problem Spot #1: A Villain Who Relies Heavily upon Mass People

As briefly discussed in the first chapter, villains often rely on others to do their own dirty work. They employ "mass people" whose presence emphasizes the villain's power.

This is a good thing. A powerful villain, by extension, makes for a more powerful story!

Yet, when it comes time for the climax, you can run into a major snag. When a powerful villain has powerful mass people to protect him, it can be difficult to credibly orchestrate a direct confrontation between the villain and your hero.

In this case, it can be easy to justify a climax where the hero faces the villain's henchman, but not the villain himself. This may seem enough to pay off your narrative debts (especially if you show the villain's comeuppance during the resolution), but it isn't.

In most circumstances, to pay off your narrative debts in full and avoid disappointing audiences, you've got to show the hero trouncing the villain.

No matter how difficult it may be, you've got to find a believable way to

orchestrate that confrontation—or risk ruining your climax, and perhaps, your entire story.

As a cautionary tale, watch *ABSOLUTE POWER*. At the beginning of its climax, Luther kills the Secret Service agent—a potent mass person—who was about to kill Luther’s daughter. Although intimidating, this agent is merely a pawn, acting on the orders of the president of the United States—the true antagonist of the piece.

The president is the one calling all the shots. He’s at the root of all of Luther’s misfortunes. And *he’s* the one that audiences should see Luther confront at the climax’s end.

But Luther doesn’t confront the president at all. Instead, this weighty task, to which the entire story has been building, is given to a secondary character, wealthy tycoon Walter Sullivan. Apparently, Walter’s influence gained the president his electoral victory.

To make matters worse, the confrontation between Walter and the president isn’t shown on-screen. Audiences only see the president open the door of the Oval Office and warmly greet Walter. Then the screen goes black. Later, through a TV report, audiences learn that during this confrontation, the president committed suicide.

With the villain taken out of commission, Luther’s problems are solved, sure, but in the *least* satisfying way possible.

To review, Luther doesn’t confront the president directly. The actual confrontation between Walter and the president is kept off-screen. Moreover, after the face-off with the Secret Service agent, the climax is devoid of thrills, failing to fulfill genre expectations.

In combination, these black marks add up to a climax that’s so underwhelming, it undermines the preceding three-quarters of the film.

This is a point I can’t stress enough.

It doesn’t matter how great the beginning of your story is, how gripping its middle. The last 10-25% of your screenplay or novel can kill a story which is, in other respects, well-executed.

As evidence, compare ABSOLUTE POWER to IN THE LINE OF FIRE. After their opening weekends, wherein both enjoyed the same level of success, the latter went on to gross over \$100 million (domestic), while the former grossed just half that.

The two films share striking parallels. Both were thrillers. Both were set against the backdrop of the United States presidency. And both starred Clint Eastwood as the hero, whose casting enhanced the film with his trademark steely-eyed intensity, even as his age raised questions of plausibility.

But only in FIRE does Clint's character directly confront his true antagonist in a thrilling climactic showdown. In my opinion, this is the main reason why, despite their parallels, FIRE became a blockbuster, while POWER did not.

There's another lesson to be learned here too. POWER was adapted for the screen by screenwriting legend William Goldman. If this can happen to him, then it can happen to anyone.

No one is immune!

Speaking of adaptations, it's interesting to examine how David Baldacci, author of the source material, originally handled *Power's* climax. In Baldacci's novel, Luther is not the central protagonist. Although Baldacci tells the story through multiple points of view, each of which competes for dominance, it's fair to say that this role belongs to a Jack Graham, a young up-and-coming lawyer.

(As a side note, Jack's character was presumably eliminated from the film so Clint Eastwood could play the hero. It is to Goldman's immense credit that even with Jack's removal, the screenplay still makes sense.)

At the tail end of the novel's climax, however, Jack doesn't confront the president. Similar to the film, that honor is accorded to another character, (not to Walter Sullivan who had, upon the president's orders, already been assassinated), but to Seth Frank, a perceptive homicide detective.

Even though Jack doesn't do the confronting, at least readers get to witness the confrontation firsthand. That's a definite improvement over the film.

But why not go all the way?

In ordinary circumstances, it wouldn't be believable for a detective, even if he is an agent of the law, to barge into the Oval Office and threaten the president. But, at this point, Seth possesses solid evidence of the president's misdoings. Furthermore, he's flanked by a contingent of D.C. cops, including the police chief, as well as the head of the FBI.

When Seth advances towards the president, the Secret Service agents in the room make no move to stop Seth. As Baldacci describes it, they "seethed at having been duped." In other words, the normally unassailable president is completely defenseless.

A bum from the street could join the crowd, and because of the way the scene is described, it wouldn't strain credibility. Well, at least not as much as it normally would.

So, why not take the scene a step further, add another member to the ensemble, and bring in Jack Graham too?

That way, the climax would end with the central protagonist confronting the story's true antagonist, making for a stronger and more satisfying finale.

(You may disagree with me. Perhaps, you contend that Seth is the central protagonist of the novel, or that he and Jack are co-protagonists who share equal weight. In either case, including Jack is still the most effective option.)

To quickly recap, Baldacci improved the credibility of the novel's climax by manipulating mass people. First, Baldacci weakened the president by removing the president's source of protection (the loyalty of the Secret Service). Then, Baldacci strengthened Seth by bolstering Seth's own quotient of mass people (the presence of the FBI director, etc).

Goldman took another tack with the script. His solution was to match power with power. As the man largely responsible for the president's electoral victory, as a shark in the Beltway food chain, it's credible that Walter Sullivan could access the president at the White House, even if the tycoon isn't accompanied by his own contingent of mass people.

The same doesn't hold true for Luther, who's not a wealthy entrepreneur, but a humble thief. A first-rate thief, to be sure, but a thief all the same. If the final confrontation with the president is set in the White House, as it is in Goldman's

screenplay, the president would still be too powerful for Luther to participate in it.

So, how could we orchestrate this confrontation in a screenplay in a believable way? How could we weaken the villain and strengthen the protagonist?

How could we level the playing field and make them better matched—without copying the novel wholesale?

We could...

...change the setting.

We could set the climax at a location, where, for whatever reason, the villain would be at a disadvantage. (For the record, this solution works brilliantly in novels too.)

What if the movie climax of *ABSOLUTE POWER* ended not at the Oval Office, but at Walter's mansion? This is, after all, where the story all began, giving it a nice symmetry.

Moreover, this choice puts the president on shaky ground. He's not in complete control of the environment, the way he is at the Oval Office. In Walter's mansion, and with Walter's aid, Luther's presence at the climax could easily be arranged without straining credibility.

Whether we keep the outcome the same as the novel (the president is tried for his crimes) or the same as the film (the president, once directly confronted, commits suicide) or even try a new approach (perhaps bring back the sniper whom Walter had hired earlier on), we'd be giving audiences what they want to see: that critical confrontation between the central protagonist and his true antagonist.

Power Problem Spot #2: A Multiple-Protagonist Story Which Has Imbalanced Antagonists

Multiple-protagonist stories come in different forms. In this section, we're going to focus on the particular variant in which each protagonist is paired with his own individual antagonist.

This setup creates a constellation of conflict which looks something like this:

- Protagonist A vs Antagonist A
- Protagonist B vs Antagonist B
- Protagonist C vs Antagonist C

Without going into the whys and the wherefores, it's usually best if you elevate one protagonist from this group above the others. Protagonist A, as a generic example, would be given more story weight than Protagonists B and C.

Going along with this basic idea, out of all the other antagonists, *Antagonist A* should have the most power. To put it another way, if Antagonist B or C is more dangerous, devious, or despicable than Antagonist A, the mismatch can make your whole story feel discordant.

This may seem fairly obvious to you. But, when you're knee-deep in the writing trenches, it's a truth which can be easily forgotten.

Comedic sidekicks, for instance, are notorious for stealing the spotlight from the protagonist. Their dialogue and role often has to be scaled back in order to give the protagonist his proper due.

A similar phenomenon can happen with a collective of antagonists. Your muse, for whatever reason, may come up with all sorts of ways to show how cunning and ruthless Antagonist B is. At the end of the day, he'll wind up eclipsing Antagonist A.

This might not hurt your story that much...that is, until it comes time for the climax. At this point, the final showdown between Protagonist A (who has the most weight) and Antagonist A (who might not have the most power and/or weight) can feel strangely anticlimactic, and it can be difficult to pinpoint the cause.

Antagonist B's level of power is the culprit. To fix the problem, modify his role so that it reflects his proper status in your antagonist hierarchy.

To illustrate, consider HORRIBLE BOSSES. Through story cues, audiences know that out of the three protagonists, Nick, Kurt, and Dale, Nick is the central one. Correspondingly, his boss, Harken, is the most formidable and

menacing (or “horrible”) of the bunch.

In a sequence of events, Harken ends up killing Kurt’s boss, Bobby. This complicates the protagonists’ lives even further, as they become the prime suspects in the murder case. It’s an excellent way to end the second act—and set up the climax.

Since Harken has taken Bobby out of the picture, the conflict with Bobby is resolved. It doesn’t have to be addressed during the climax, leaving just Harken for the protagonists to deal with. This is beneficial because it streamlines the climax, and in doing so, preserves story momentum.

But this tactic only works because Harken is the true antagonist of the tale. If the reverse had occurred—if Bobby had somehow, through comedic bumbling, managed to kill Harken—leaving Bobby for the boys to confront at the climax, the film’s ending would’ve felt anticlimactic, even though, as before, all loose ends pertaining to both antagonists would’ve been wrapped up.

If you’re familiar with the film, you may’ve realized that so far, I’ve neglected to discuss Dale’s boss, Julia. To resolve this conflict, the film shows the steps Dale takes to defeat his nightmarish employer, but it does so, when Dale has, like Nick and Kurt, returned back to his “everyday” world. Overall, the scene has the feeling of a resolution, although technically, it’s really a climax and resolution in one.

This was a wise choice. If Dale’s conflict with Julia had remained unresolved, audiences would’ve been dissatisfied with the film which wouldn’t have provided them with a complete experience. But if the climax of Dale and Julia’s plotline had occurred immediately after the climax with Harken, the former would’ve felt anticlimactic.

In short, by “stuffing” the climax with Julia into the resolution, the story’s narrative debts were paid off according to a chronology which would satisfy audiences the most.

Power Problem Spot #3: An Antagonist Who Has the Most Weight, But Not the Most Power

In some stories, a villain may have the most story weight, but because he is

subordinate to another bad guy, this villain does not have the most authority. In this respect, therefore, he doesn't have the most power.

However, generally speaking, story weight trumps power. A villain with more weight, but less power than his superior, is going to be the true antagonist of your story, and the one audiences want to see the hero battle with at the climax.

Note: “Villain behind the villain” plots can go against this rule of thumb and still be effective. It all depends on context. This special situation is covered in more detail in other sections of this writing guide.

Setting “villain behind the villain” plots aside, let's discuss why you might even want to make your primary villain subordinate to another in the first place. If not done well, this dynamic can undercut the primary villain, weakening your story as a whole.

So, why would you want your primary villain to answer to another character at all?

Some benefits include:

- It's a natural way to layer more conflict into your story (the primary villain may argue with his superior over how to proceed).
- It enables a more complex, and a less one-note, portrayal of your primary villain (he'll be at the mercy of his superior, which makes your villain vulnerable).
- It can yield an intriguing moral dilemma (the primary villain may be torn between his loyalty to his superior and the truth the hero has brought to light).
- It can create a “backdoor” villain for a sequel (more on this topic, later).

THE RETURN OF THE JEDI is a classic example of this technique in motion. Technically, because Darth Vader takes orders from the Emperor, despite Darth Vader's considerable power and menace, he's not the most powerful villain in the film. That distinction belongs to the Emperor, whom Vader chillingly refers to as his “master.”

Nevertheless, Vader has—by far—accrued more story weight. He has more screentime than the Emperor in JEDI. Since Vader has pursued Luke across the

galaxy in two previous films, Vader's prominence is further heightened.

Furthermore, he's the one who cut off Luke's hand at the end of *THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK*. And, lest we forget, Vader is Luke's father. He is the true antagonist of the tale.

Nonetheless, even though the Emperor is less prominent than Vader throughout the original *STAR WARS* trilogy, the emperor's level of authority significantly contributes to *JEDI's* grand finale, setting up two gripping dilemmas at the climax.

Will the Emperor be able to turn Luke to the dark side—as he had already done with Vader?

Can Vader really stand by and witness the Emperor killing Luke as Luke begs for his father to help him?

Theoretically, the Emperor doesn't have to participate in the climax. Even without his presence, Vader, following the Emperor's instructions, could've tried to turn Luke on his own. When this plan fails, Vader could try to kill Luke, who would, instead of begging his father to interfere as Luke does in the film version, beg Vader to stop.

However, the Emperor's presence dramatizes both Luke's and Vader's choices, multiplying the climactic tension a thousandfold. Without the Emperor, our hypothetical climax would've still been thrilling (there is, after all, a lot going on besides the whole Luke-Vader-Emperor power struggle), but not as thrilling as the original.

Perhaps, making your primary villain subordinate to a superior will be the perfect solution to take your climax to the next level. It could also enhance your story by creating a "backdoor" villain for a sequel.

The Backdoor Villain

Television series are sold through a pilot, an episode which is produced in order for TV networks to gauge the show's potential for success. Oftentimes, if the series goes to air, the pilot will be broadcast as its first episode.

Frequently, spin-off series are brought into being through an alternative

mechanism: the backdoor pilot. A group of characters will appear in an episode of a pre-existing series (this is the backdoor pilot), and then, during the subsequent TV season, will star in their own series (the spin-off).

NCIS is a well-known example. Characters for this spin-off were first introduced to audiences during two episodes from JAG's eighth season. Intriguingly, NCIS itself used backdoor pilots to launch its own spin-offs, NCIS: LOS ANGELES and NCIS: NEW ORLEANS.

You can employ a similar technique with your villains. While the true antagonist would dominate your first screenplay or novel (the equivalent of the pre-existing TV series), he would be accompanied by a peripheral, or backdoor, villain.

This backdoor villain could be a superior to the true antagonist or, unbeknownst to the true antagonist, he could lurk at the periphery of your story. Then, in your sequel screenplay or novel (the equivalent of the TV spin-off), the backdoor villain would be elevated to true antagonist status, and subsequently, take center stage.

To be clear, you don't have to resolve the conflict with the backdoor villain in the story in which he first appears. You can leave this conflict unresolved and open-ended. Audiences won't cry foul, the way they would if you had done the same with the hero's true antagonist (and were writing a standalone story or a series in which each installment is supposed to be a self-contained unit).

If you're self-publishing a series, this method is a great way to strengthen the continuity between each of your novels. Plus, by the time your backdoor villain transforms into a true antagonist, you've built anticipation for the final hero-villain showdown across two novels, not just one.

This will deepen audience involvement in this particular climax, yielding an even richer emotional experience. In fact, you may want to milk this response even further, building anticipation across *three* novels. In other words, your backdoor villain would appear in two novels before you elevate him to the status of true antagonist in the third.

If you're a fan of romance novels, you'll know that romance novelists use supporting characters to create backdoor heroines (and heroes) all the time—and with great results.

For instance, in book 1, readers would be introduced to the heroine's younger sister. In book 2, the younger sister would be the heroine, and readers would be introduced to her best friend. In book 3, the best friend would be elevated to heroine status...and so on and so forth.

For other genres, however, I'd embrace this backdoor technique more sparingly, certainly not for every installment in your series. Otherwise, it will probably lose its effect.

If you're a screenwriter (or if you're pursuing a traditional publishing deal), you know there are no guarantees. Your movie or novel first has to prove itself before you'll be asked to write a sequel.

Actually, if you're a screenwriter, despite your earlier contributions, you may not be asked at all. Another screenwriter, perhaps one with a stronger relationship with the director, will be brought on board instead.

Given the fact that you may never be in a position to elevate your backdoor villain into a true antagonist, should you bother with backdoor villainy at all?

My reply is an enthusiastic "yes!"

Here's why: the presence of the backdoor villain will add extra whizz-bang to your story as a whole, and perhaps, to your climax in particular.

In *SHERLOCK HOLMES* (2009), Irene Adler repeatedly hampers Sherlock Holmes's investigation—much to the delight of audiences. Her interference culminates in a stunning set piece atop the Tower Bridge, where Holmes squares off against the film's true antagonist, Lord Blackwood, for the last time.

But Irene is not acting of her own accord. She's following the instructions of Professor Moriarty, a backdoor villain who will ascend to true antagonist status in the sequel, *SHERLOCK HOLMES 2: GAME OF SHADOWS*.

Likewise, in *THE BOURNE IDENTITY*, Conklin's clashes with his superior, Abbott, repeatedly add to the entertainment value of the film. At the climax, this value reaches its zenith when audiences believe that an assassin, upon instructions from Abbott, is about to kill Bourne.

However, this is all misdirection. The assassin's true target is Conklin. Although brief, this unexpected surprise is enough to give audiences an extra thrill—making them feel like the story went beyond fulfilling its narrative debts, exceeded their expectations, and deposited a “surplus” into their pockets.

But this was only made possible through the power struggle between Conklin and Abbott, who would later go on to become the true antagonist in the sequel, *THE BOURNE SUPREMACY*.

Remove Moriarty from *SHERLOCK HOLMES* or Abbott from *THE BOURNE IDENTITY*, and both films wouldn't be half as satisfying. In other words, including a backdoor villain will likely improve the overall quality of your story, increasing its odds of selling in the first place.

Even if you never get the opportunity to script a sequel and transform your backdoor villain into a true antagonist, that's a benefit which can't be ignored.

In sum, the backdoor villain technique is a great one to add to your repertoire. It possesses several positives, and, as far as I can tell, no drawbacks.

This, of course, assumes that you clearly communicate the backdoor villain's power to audiences (he's not going to be very intriguing if he's a two-bit player), while nevertheless, keeping him at the periphery until he's been properly elevated to true antagonist status.

If your backdoor villain starts to accumulate too much story weight, if he directly contributes to too much damage, you'll disrupt the balance. Instead of eagerly anticipating the confrontation between your hero and the backdoor villain in a future installment, audiences will be expecting it to take place *now*.

When you don't deliver the goods (because you're saving them for a sequel), audiences will likely walk away feeling cheated. Such a response will, in a horribly ironic twist of cause and effect, kill your chances of a successful sequel.

Archvillains and Antagonist Removal

Earlier on, we touched on the difficulties of writing a “villain behind the villain” kind of plot. We're going to revisit this topic here, but focus on a specific nuance: archvillains and antagonist removal.

Remember when we talked about Harken killing off Bobby in HORRIBLE BOSSES? Using the true antagonist to eliminate a second-tier antagonist was a brilliant move. It wrapped up the conflict with Bobby, while simultaneously streamlining the climactic showdown with Harken.

The same benefits are produced when an archvillain kills the surface antagonist in a “villain behind the villain” plot: this act resolves the conflict with the surface antagonist, leaving the hero to grapple solely with the archvillain at the climax.

Again, these advantages come in handy when your page count is spiraling out of control, or when incorporating the surface antagonist into your climax completely ruins its momentum.

Additionally, the presence of this story beat is a fantastic way to reveal the archvillain’s true identity, while its ruthlessness further reinforces the archvillain’s power. (If you need convincing, just re-watch the scene in IRON MAN when Obadiah immobilizes Raza.)

The big difference though, is that in a multiple-protagonist story like HORRIBLE BOSSES, audiences know Harken is the true antagonist all along. From the very beginning, they looked forward to seeing Nick outwit Harken.

The same can’t be said for an archvillain.

Audiences will be in the dark until you make your big reveal. Typically, the longer you delay the reveal of the archvillain’s identity, the more hero-surface antagonist clashes your story will accumulate.

Each hero-surface antagonist clash prior to the big reveal builds up the expectation that your hero will confront *the surface antagonist*—not the archvillain—at the climax. The more encounters there are, the more story weight the surface antagonist accrues, and the more audiences will look forward to this final showdown.

If the surface antagonist is a henchman, then audiences will want to see the hero dispatch this henchman. If the surface antagonist is a nemesis who’s turned into an ally, audiences will be most satisfied if they witness this former nemesis provide assistance to the hero at the climax.

Either way, when the archvillain kills the surface antagonist, audiences get deprived of what they've been anticipating.

This is not exactly a recipe for success.

The “early bird” archvillain reveal once again can brilliantly come to your story's rescue. If the archvillain kills the surface antagonist, perhaps as soon as the midpoint, the surface antagonist can't accrue any more story weight.

He's dead!

The archvillain, on the other hand, can. When he does, his story weight will match his level of power. Furthermore, as aforementioned, throughout Act 2B, audiences' antipathy towards the archvillain has a chance to grow. This, in turn, creates a more intense emotional experience for audiences at the climax (irrespective of the actual action which takes place).

One last note: if the archvillain doesn't kill a henchman surface antagonist, then following the principle of escalation, at the climax, the hero should deal with the surface antagonist *first*.

In GHOST, Sam deals with Carl's accomplice before Sam faces off against Carl for the last time. In MONSTERS, INC., Sulley banishes Randall to Southern swampland before Sulley defeats Waternoose.

Finally, in THE FUGITIVE (which had *two* surface antagonists; no wonder it's a classic!), Kimble kills the one-armed man who murdered Kimble's wife before taking down Nichols, the archvillain. (For those of you keeping track, Gerard, the other surface antagonist, turns into Kimble's ally, aiding and abetting Kimble to achieve the latter exploit.)

True Antagonist Determinant #3: Genre

Because genre establishes audience expectations, it can trump power and story weight.

In terms of delivering the genre goods, as a general principle, action and thrills take precedence over other genre elements such as drama, romance, and comedy.

By extension, villains supersede all other antagonists: nemeses, rivals, and amorous opponents.

So, for example, if you were writing a romantic thriller, the confrontation with the villain—not the amorous opponent—should be the one to end your climax. Resolving the conflict between amorous opponents can occur before, or even afterwards, during the resolution.

Typically, in a story populated by multiple villains, the true antagonist will be the one with the most power and/or weight. But if this antagonist can't, for whatever reason, truly deliver on the genre goods, the climax may end with a less powerful and/or prominent villain and still satisfy audience expectations (keeping in mind that you *really* have to deliver the goods).

Going back to *THE BOURNE SUPREMACY*, Kirill's one atrocious henchman. He not only kills Bourne's girlfriend, but also frames Bourne for crimes Bourne didn't commit.

Nonetheless, despite Kirill's impressively malicious skillset, he lacks authority, or power. He's just a henchman acting on orders formulated by a Russian oil magnate, who's working jointly with Ward Abbott.

In comparison to Abbott, the Russian magnate has less screentime. Plus, as an employee of the CIA, the organization responsible for training Bourne, Abbott is more integral to Bourne's current predicament. Hence, Abbott is the true antagonist of this story.

However, Bourne doesn't confront Abbott at the climax, but at the end of Act Two. The climax revolves around Bourne's last showdown with Kirill, which culminates in a thrilling and action-packed car chase through the streets of

Moscow.

In contrast to Kirill, Abbott is older, and more of a “desk jockey.” Although Abbott does snap the neck of a younger colleague (!), it would stretch credibility for Abbott to hound Bourne at the climax, the way Kirill does.

In short, despite Kirill’s lack of authority, Kirill’s final encounter with Bourne doesn’t feel anticlimactic because it handsomely delivers the genre goods. Audiences are unlikely to complain that the true antagonist was removed from the story long before its ending.

You can see the same principle in action in the multiple-protagonist comedy *FIRST WIVES CLUB*. Of the three protagonists, Annie is elevated to central protagonist status. She’s the one audiences are first introduced to; she’s the one who provides the narrative voiceover.

Yet, out of the three antagonistic ex-husbands, Annie’s, rather discordantly, isn’t accorded weight in proportion to hers. In fact, he disappears for most of the film.

Still, the flaw is something only an astute screenwriter would notice. The mismatch wouldn’t bother members of the target audience at all. They are given exactly what they want, what they are promised: a comedic revenge fantasy which celebrates the power of female friendship. Thus, they can walk away from the film feeling perfectly satisfied.

* * *

We covered several guidelines in this chapter. Each of them (as well as others you encounter in this book or even elsewhere) are designed to help you construct the most gripping version of your screenplay or novel.

That’s not to say, however, that bending—or outright breaking—these rules can’t produce a real page-turner.

It can. Definitely.

And crafting a page-turner is, of course, the ultimate end goal.

No matter the path you take to get there, if you arrive at *that* destination, you

can throw the rulebook out the window.

For instance, ERIN BROCKOVICH does not confront PG&E, who's primarily embodied by their legal counsel, at the climax. The outcome of this conflict is shown through the film's resolution when a judge orders the utility company to pay maximum damages.

In BRAVEHEART, William Wallace doesn't confront his true antagonist, Edward the Longshanks, but an executioner, an agent (or mass person) of the king. This scene itself is devoid of action stunts (but certainly not of drama). The outcome of the longstanding conflict between England and Scotland is, similar to BROCKOVICH, shown through the resolution.

Finally, the entire climactic confrontation between Truman and Christof in THE TRUMAN SHOW is indirect. Neither stares into the whites of the other's eyes, just pixelated renditions of them.

Nevertheless, all of these films captivate till the very last second.

Bending or breaking the rules worked for them. It *may* also work for you.

But, you've got to be honest with yourself.

For most writers, ideas appear willy-nilly. They don't arrive in the sequence, nor of the intensity, needed to generate the most gripping tale possible.

That's why the rulebook exists in the first place: it's there to steer you in that general direction.

If you end your story without a direct confrontation between your protagonist and his true antagonist, make sure that making this exception is, indeed, worthwhile.

Make sure that you haven't just taken the most expedient path to reach THE END...that you haven't cheated audiences of the experience they've been looking forward to the most.

Rather, you've provided them with a superior, more satisfying substitute.

3 Quality Control Tests Your Story Climax Must Pass to Earn Audiences' Enthusiastic Seal of Approval

So, here we are. You've orchestrated the scenes of your climax so that your protagonist directly confronts his true antagonist.

That, fellow scribe, is just a starting point.

To be sure, it's the essence of the climax in a nutshell. By delivering it, you're certainly on the right track. All the same, it's a *minimum* requirement.

Execution makes a difference.

A big difference.

It distinguishes a merely satisfactory climax from one which is deeply satisfying.

To produce the latter, you need to carefully inspect the climactic sequence you've assembled. By running it through three specific quality control tests, you'll be better able to ascertain if your vision is poised to earn audiences' seal of approval (or not).

If your story climax fails these tests, you won't be truly fulfilling your narrative debts, and audiences are likely to walk away from your screenplay or novel with disappointment filling their hearts.

If your climax does pass these tests, then you've probably paid off your narrative debts to their fullest extent, and audiences will walk away from their experience satisfied.

Depending on your scorecard, you may even exceed audience expectations. Because they'll feel like you've paid off your narrative debts with a "surplus," audiences will be more inclined to wax enthusiastic about your screenplay or novel...paving the way for more sales and more favorable reviews.

Jackpot!

At this point, you might be wondering what these quality control tests entail. I'm happy to oblige.

They are tests of:

- proactivity
- stakes
- escalation

Basically, to ace these tests with flying colors—and ensure that your climax thrills and delights—your protagonist must (1) *actively* bring the central story conflict to a close, (2) while something hangs in the balance, and (3) in a way which feels escalated in comparison to previous story events.

To make sure your story climax makes the grade, keep on reading!

Quality Control Check #1: Proactivity

For your story climax to be powerful, for it to truly satisfy audiences, your hero must *actively* defeat his true antagonist (assuming, of course, that your hero is indeed victorious).

When your protagonist resolves the central conflict of your story, it may seem like you are, as you've promised audiences, paying off your narrative debts in full.

But if your protagonist goes about it in a passive way, you're not.

You're paying off your debts with counterfeit cash.

That's because audiences expect your hero to solve his problem through his own choices and actions.

If you don't deliver that experience, you're going to disappoint them, and the overall quality of your climax is going to suffer...perhaps bringing down the rest of your story with it.

Not good.

It's really, really easy to make this mistake. Fortunately, it's also easy to correct—if you know what to look for.

As pertaining to the climax, there are three particular facets of passivity you should assess with vigilance:

- how your hero receives aid
- how your hero shares the spotlight
- how your hero brings this conclusive encounter to a close

Now, let's explore these topics in more depth!

Pre-Establishing Sources of Aid

To craft a gripping finale, at some point during the climax, your protagonist is likely to be in a tough spot. Despite his valiant efforts, it *appears* that he's going to lose—and lose big.

This mini “all is lost” moment within the climax, (separate from the setbacks which end the second act), is known by various names. Blake Snyder refers to it as “the high tower surprise,” while JRR Tolkien views it as the opposite of a catastrophe, a “eucatastrophe.” I prefer to call it simply “the false defeat.”

What it's called doesn't really matter. It's more important to understand why this story beat is so pervasive.

Through it, audiences will be right where you want them: hanging on every word, every movement, as they wonder how your protagonist is going to get out of this mess.

They're enjoying this tension.

Enormously.

Therein lies the trouble.

To bring your audiences to this thrilling moment, you've written yourself into a corner. When it comes time to extricate your protagonist from this dicey situation (whose precariousness, remember, delights audiences to no end), you're likely to be tense too—but not in the good way.

It can be extremely tempting to solve your hero's predicament by having a miracle fall into his lap. Indeed, this temptation is so prevalent, this particular solution even has its own Latin name—*deus ex machina*—which roughly translates to “god from the machine.”

This is certainly an expedient way to extricate your hero, and put him on equal footing with his more powerful antagonist. Nonetheless, it's not a satisfying one.

Remember, audiences don't just want to know the outcome of the central story

conflict, they want to see your protagonist *actively* resolve this conflict.

That doesn't happen when a miracle falls into his lap.

That's not to say that your hero can't receive climactic assistance right when he needs it most.

You just need to set up that assistance beforehand, so that when it appears, it doesn't smack of convenience. Thus, when it's presented to audiences, they should experience a feeling of recognition, rather than a sense of randomness.

This way, it doesn't seem like a miracle has fallen into your protagonist's lap. Instead, it looks like he's savvy enough to make use of all the advantages (information, weaponry, etc) at his disposal.

In other words, you maintain his active status—and pay off your narrative debts with genuine dollars.

To help you accomplish this objective, take a look at the three extrication approaches discussed below. While they're all variations of the same basic principle of pre-establishment, they differ in how much effort they require to implement.

1) Use setting as setup

This is, by far, the easiest option (albeit the least thrilling). All you have to do is casually introduce your hero's solution when you first describe the setting of the climactic confrontation.

At the appropriate moment, your hero's method of extrication will be ready and waiting for him to use, but at the same time, it won't appear random. Generally speaking, the more time that elapses between the solution's introduction and its actual deployment, the more satisfying the latter tends to be.

As a generic example, let's say that at the beginning of the climax, your hero takes refuge in a guesthouse on the grounds of a large estate. Eventually cornered and outnumbered by the bad guys, he needs to create a diversion, so he can escape to the grand manor (and so you can continue your gripping grand finale).

To accomplish this, he ignites some canisters of fuel which had been stored in the guesthouse. Their appearance isn't random however, because you had described them when first introducing the guesthouse setting to audiences.

Keep in mind, though, that removing the arbitrariness of your hero's solution is just one half of the equation. Even if, due to the setting, its appearance looks natural, if your hero doesn't take part in using it, he'll still come across as passive.

Going back to our guesthouse example, if the canisters of fuel had randomly exploded, or if the bad guys had accidentally ignited them, your hero would've seemed lucky, rather than proactive, and his extrication wouldn't have been very satisfying.

2) Use a previous scene as setup

This option is exactly what it sounds like: you plant the hero's solution in a previous scene (the setup), and later on, he'll use it to extricate himself at the climax (the payoff).

Time elapse is critical here, more so than with approach #1.

If too little time separates the setup from the payoff, audiences are likely to see the payoff coming from a mile away. Its eventual deployment won't be a surprise. Your ending will bore, and audiences will walk away from your story feeling disappointed—exactly what you were trying to avoid by using the payoff in the first place.

If too much time separates the setup from the payoff, audiences *can* forget all about the setup by the time the payoff occurs. Despite your elaborate planning, the payoff can still seem like a miracle which fell into your hero's lap! (Because audiences are a savvy bunch, this is less common a problem, though, than having too little time elapse between the setup and payoff.)

To enhance audience surprise, and thus deepen their eventual delight, you'll probably need to resort to more than just the right amount of time elapse to camouflage your setup. You'll probably need to incorporate an element of distraction too.

As I wrote in *Trough of Hell*, a writing guide exclusively dedicated to the “all is

lost” moment at the end of Act Two:

“It’s also a good idea to embed the setup into your story in such a way that audiences register its presence without consciously recognizing it as such.

The best approach can be summed up by Ron Weasley’s encounter with a three-headed dog in *HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER’S STONE*. When Hermione asks him if he noticed what the dog was standing on, he replies indignantly, ‘I wasn’t looking at its feet! I was a bit preoccupied with its heads!’

To put it another way, you should introduce your setup in such a way that audience attention is drawn to something else in the scene (the three-headed dog) other than the setup (the trapdoor at the dog’s feet).

Alternately, you can fool the audience into thinking that your setup is intended for one purpose, when in fact, it’ll be used for quite a different purpose at the point of payoff.”

ROBIN HOOD: PRINCE OF THIEVES provides us with a great template to steal from. At its climax, after a drawn-out duel, the Sheriff of Nottingham divests Robin of Robin’s sword and prepares to inflict a fatal wound.

Uh-oh.

Things look pretty bleak for the intrepid hero. Suddenly, Robin extracts a jewel-encrusted dagger hidden in his boot and stabs the dastardly sheriff.

It’s an exciting moment, to be sure. But if this had been the dagger’s first appearance in the story, audiences would’ve felt cheated by the surprise solution. They would’ve been more inclined to boo than to cheer.

Fortunately, in the special extended DVD edition, the dagger made not one—but two!—appearances prior to the climax, removing any sting of contrivance.

In the first, Nottingham presents Robin’s love interest, Marian, with the dagger as “a small token of his undying devotion to her safety.” In this scene, audience focus is not really on the dagger, but on the sheriff’s intentions and Marian’s response to them.

For how long will she successfully stave off his unwanted advances?

In the dagger's second appearance, Marian nervously donates the dagger to Robin, who has stolen a wealth of bounty from Nottingham. Here, again, audience focus isn't on the dagger, but on the budding romance between Robin and Marian.

How long will audiences have to wait before these characters acknowledge their feelings to one another?

Observe that this camouflage created a more satisfying climactic experience for audiences. In both setup scenes, audiences were more likely to be paying attention to Marian than to the dagger. Hence, its use at the climax was still surprising—and therefore still able to delight—but not random.

In less life-threatening genres, romantic intrigue isn't typically used to set up the weapon the hero will use to vanquish the villain at the climax. Rather than camouflaging a weapon, moments of emotional intimacy will be used instead to embed an object or piece of information the hero will need to woo back the heroine at the climax (or vice versa).

3) Use motifs or subplots as setup

In some situations, you have to be more elaborate with your setup.

Your hero's climactic solution won't just be introduced once (or twice, as is the case in *ROBIN HOOD*), and then relegated to obscurity until the appropriate moment.

Rather, it's a thread which is interwoven throughout the fabric of your story. Furthermore, even if it wasn't used to aid the hero at the climax, it could stand on its own. That is to say, it would still contribute to the story in some essential way.

For instance, in *SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE*, Annie almost doesn't make it to the observation deck of the Empire State Building, where she is supposed to meet Sam. It's closing time.

Nevertheless, the building guard permits her ascent to the deck because he is a fan of *AN AFFAIR TO REMEMBER*, a motif which runs throughout the story and inspired the Empire rendezvous (not to mention the film's premise) in the first place.

In an alternative version, the guard could've finally relented because he suddenly felt charitable. It is, after all, Valentine's Day. But the use of the AFFAIR motif makes his turnaround less convenient and infinitely more satisfying.

Similarly, in HOME ALONE, when Marv latches onto the cuff of Kevin's pants, Kevin breaks the bumbling burglar's grip by tossing a tarantula onto Marv's face. It's a miracle!

Well, not quite.

The arachnid's presence would've come across like a major *deus ex machina* if the spider, having been freed from his cage earlier on, hadn't cropped up several times throughout, seemingly observing Kevin's behavior with detached amusement.

At the end of the climax, Kevin is caught once again. This time, Kevin can't use the spider to save him. Instead, he's rescued by Old Man Marley, an elderly neighbor whom Kevin has befriended. (Note: while not a *deus ex machina*, this choice still makes Kevin seem passive. We'll address this issue later on.)

Like the tarantula, Marley appears in the story numerous times. Indeed, the subplot involving his friendship with Kevin imbues the film with Christmas spirit and speaks to the theme of valuing family.

This raises a good point. Sometimes, extrication approach #2 simply is not going to suffice. If you're seriously stuck, maybe you need to think bigger and broader. Go beyond a single setup scene; take a closer look at your subplot(s).

In the happiest of circumstances, an element already present in a subplot could be easily adapted to provide your hero with the perfect climactic solution to extricate him from the false defeat story beat. In other cases, you'll have to make substantial changes to your subplot, perhaps even create one from scratch.

This is a scary prospect, and it's certainly not a guarantee of success. But don't be afraid of exploring this possibility. Thinking along these lines might not only yield a more thrilling (yet believable) climax, but also a deeper, richer story.

Distributing Shiny Moments

At the climax, your protagonist really needs to take center stage and prove his heroic mettle. He should be at the forefront of the action, whether the action is an actual battle, a verbal confrontation, or another kind of encounter.

If your protagonist isn't at the forefront of what's happening, it doesn't automatically mean that he's behaving passively. Even so, if he fades into the background, it can appear that way, especially if it seems like other characters are merely carrying him along for the ride.

When your story is dominated by a single protagonist, you probably won't have to worry about this. You'll automatically make your hero the star.

Hopefully, at least. Although Anderton is the undisputed central protagonist of *MINORITY REPORT*, it can be argued that, in addition to technology, at the climax, he displays marked overreliance on his wife.

More likely though, you'll have a tougher time when throughout your story, your hero has significantly shared the spotlight with another protagonist or with a supporting character.

It's not always easy to balance the needs of every character, each of whom deserves a shiny moment where he sparkles like one of those *TWILIGHT* vampires.

To illustrate, let's again compare the 2007 shooting script of *STAR TREK* to its film version. In both, at the climax, Kirk and Spock beam aboard the *Narada*, the starship helmed by the villain, Nero.

But the shooting script differs significantly from the film in one key respect: in it, Spock gets all the glory.

And by all, I mean all!

For starters, while Kirk deals with one Romulan guard, Spock dispenses with five. As Spock explains to Kirk, "I am trained in the Vulcan martial art of Suus Mahna."

Next, Spock tries to “mind meld” with one guard, who, despite the recent onslaught, remains semi-conscious. When Spock fails, Kirk instructs Spock to “Suus Mahna his ass!”

Spock protests. Suus Mahna is only used for self-defense, and the guard from whom he’s trying to extract a critical computer code, clearly poses them no harm.

Invoking his authority as captain, Kirk orders Spock to pretend the guard is still a threat. Spock complies. Mini-mission accomplished.

The scene is amusing, and it helps advance the story forward. Only, the humor is achieved at Kirk’s expense. While you never want to sacrifice a character for the sake of a joke, it’s particularly detrimental to do so at the climax, when your protagonist is supposed to be at his most heroic.

Perhaps, if Kirk had been given another moment to shine, this comedic beat would’ve worked. But he wasn’t.

When Spock sabotages the *Narada*’s weaponry, Nero focuses all of his energies on killing Spock. Kirk never directly confronts Nero, the story’s true antagonist, either. Instead, Kirk attempts to rescue Captain Pike, whom Nero has taken captive.

This looks like the perfect opportunity to give Kirk a moment to shine, doesn’t it? Only, once again, he is denied.

Because Kirk is busy unfastening Pike’s bonds, Kirk doesn’t see four guards enter the torture room. Pike, however, does—and kills them using the phaser-gun Pike has extracted from Kirk’s holster.

To recap:

- Spock fights off five Romulan guards; Kirk fights one
- Spock engages in more martial arts, while Kirk cracks a joke
- Spock engages (albeit indirectly) with the villain; Kirk does not engage at all
- Captain Pike (whom Kirk is supposed to be rescuing) saves Kirk

In essence, Kirk doesn't have a single heroic moment during the climax! Because Kirk's actions have rendered him a supporting player, he's a hero in name, but not by deed.

Sure, on the surface at least, the shooting script paid off its narrative debts: the central conflict with the bad guy is resolved in a genre-fulfilling sequence; all loose ends were addressed. However, the script didn't make good on the promise to showcase Kirk as a champion.

It paid off its debts with counterfeit tender.

Thankfully, in the movie, Kirk comes into his own. When Kirk and Spock beam aboard Nero's ship, like highly efficient, well-trained attack dogs, *both* of them *jointly* take out the Romulan guards they encounter. Kirk even covers Spock as Spock mind melds with the same semi-conscious guard from the shooting script.

While Spock launches a heroic mission to disable Nero's main weapon, Kirk engages Nero in hand-to-hand combat. Nero is merciless—Kirk doesn't even get one punch in—but abandons the fight when Nero learns that Spock has been successful. Kirk goes on to rescue Captain Pike, who, as in the shooting script, kills Romulan guards with Kirk's own gun.

Granted, these circumstances (Nero pummeling Kirk to a pulp; Pike saving Kirk) do render Kirk somewhat passive, but the effect is substantially softened by Kirk's victory against Ayel (Nero's second in command) which is sandwiched in between both.

Notice that the core elements of the climax in both versions remain the same. And the end result in both is identical—Kirk and Spock have saved the day—but the effect of the film's climax is far superior.

This time, the story's narrative debts were paid off with genuine dollars. This time, Kirk was given an opportunity to demonstrate his valor. This time, audiences got what they wanted: to see Kirk as a bone fide badass!

One last point: the scene with Kirk, Spock, and the bevy of Romulan guards is not all that different from the one in the shooting script. It only required minor adjustments to make Kirk appear more of an active hero.

This is a good lesson. If you've paid off your narrative debts with fake cash in your rough draft, you don't necessarily have to completely throw out what you've written.

To pay off your debts for real, you might have to modify your text only slightly. Put a different spin on it, so that, among other things, your hero achieves sufficient glory.

Sharing the Story Spotlight with Sidekicks and Other Supporting Characters

Due to various story choices and from certain marketing materials, I think it's fair to say that STAR TREK isn't a true dual protagonist story, like LETHAL WEAPON, for example.

Kirk is presented as the central protagonist, somewhat eclipsing Spock. Nonetheless, the film climax aboard the *Narada* plays out much like the way you'd expect it would in a true dual protagonist story. Screen time is evenly distributed between Kirk and Spock, and the obstacles they face are of fairly equal parity.

In contrast, if you've written a story with one clear hero, and his other teammates are not co-protagonists, but supporting characters, this won't work. You'll need to adjust your approach accordingly.

You still need to make sure that your hero is the star of the climax. This isn't the time for him to become a wallflower.

By the same token, he shouldn't hog the spotlight all for himself. Whoever else is involved in your grand finale, take care that he gets his due too.

To get you on the right track, check out the four sidekick shiny moment strategies discussed below:

1) Sidekicks can facilitate the hero's participation in the climax

Without supporting characters, most protagonists would have a tough time participating in the climax itself.

After suffering a devastating setback at the trough of hell, many heroes

withdraw. This is a prime opportunity for a supporting character to encourage the hero not to give up, but to fight back.

Megan in *BRIDESMAIDS* is a textbook example of this. Literally browbeating Annie out of wallowing in a pool of self-pity, Megan shines by motivating Annie to try to reclaim what Annie's lost: her best friend, a man who respects her, and her passion for baking.

Additionally, supporting characters can accrue shiny moments by helping to transport the hero to the location where he will confront his true antagonist, perhaps via a futuristic helicopter (*AVATAR*) or a family sedan (*BRIDGET JONES'S DIARY*).

If you're writing a romance, you have to be especially careful with this tactic. If you're not careful, it can result in a clichéd "race to the airport" sequence, something you should strive to avoid. (*Note: specific pointers on what to do instead will be discussed at length in the last chapter.*)

2) Sidekicks can clear barriers between the hero and his true antagonist

By removing obstacles, supporting characters clear the way for the hero to directly confront his true antagonist at the climax.

These obstacles can be inanimate (like the drawbridge lowered by the seven dwarves in *SNOW WHITE AND THE HUNTSMAN*), human (the assassins killed by *SKYFALL*'s groundskeeper) or even paranormal (Voldemort's pet snake beheaded by Neville Longbottom in *HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS, PART II*).

As defined by Christopher Vogler in *The Writer's Journey*, threshold guardians are powerful figures positioned at the gateway to a new world, in order to prevent the unworthy from entering. Thinking along these lines may help you figure out who—or what—could logically block your protagonist (and his pals) at this stage of their journey.

In an action movie or thriller, a henchman, whom the good guys have battled with before, will frequently play threshold guardian. In other genres, the threshold guardian will likely be a new personage, usually someone who works in the capacity of a gatekeeper at the venue where the climax takes place.

Think of the Savoy concierge in NOTTING HILL whom Will is only able to bypass through his handicapped friend's white lie and the officious pageant official whom Richard Hoover pleads with (even going so far as to kneel on the ground) in LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE.

In an interesting twist, a supporting character might accrue a shiny moment by becoming the threshold guardian who tries to block the protagonist's advancement!

For example, in A FEW GOOD MEN, Jo Galloway warns Kaffee that he could get into a lot of trouble by going after Colonel Jessep during the trial. Her role as threshold guardian is especially noteworthy because she's spent half the film goading Kaffee to do this very thing.

Another great example is from HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE. Once again, it features supporting cast member Neville Longbottom. He doesn't earn his shiny moment by providing assistance to Harry, Ron, or Hermione at the climax.

Instead, functioning as a threshold guardian, he tries to prevent them from taking part in the climax at all. As a crowning touch, it's this act of boldness which earns the Gryffindors enough points to beat Slytherin and win the House Cup.

3) Sidekicks can aid the hero in vanquishing the true antagonist

A supporting character can garner shiny moments by assisting the hero to defeat the story's true antagonist.

For example, the hero may become disarmed in the midst of battle, and a sidekick may toss the hero a suitable weapon in the nick of time. The sidekick may also injure the true antagonist himself, nevertheless leaving infliction of the fatal wound for the hero to execute.

This approach is fraught with one major pitfall: if you're not vigilant about it, the supporting character can be the one who ultimately fells the true antagonist—a shiny moment, which by rights, belongs to the hero. (We'll discuss this topic, the assignment of the "definitive action" in more detail, later on in this chapter.)

Here's one way around this snare: have your supporting character stop the villain's plan while the hero stops the villain.

Think of SHERLOCK HOLMES 2: GAME OF SHADOWS. By preventing the assassination of a European ambassador, Sim and Watson thwart Moriarty from launching a world war. Even so, they don't confront Moriarty directly. That honor goes to Holmes.

Okay, okay. Watson is really more of a co-protagonist than a supporting character. But the principle behind the example still holds true!

4) Sidekicks can fully “bloom” after the climax and during the resolution

Sometimes, a supporting character may shine only after the hero has vanquished the story's true antagonist.

For instance, examine the distribution of shiny moments between Axel Foley and his sidekicks, Rosewood and Taggart in BEVERLY HILLS COP. During the climax, Rosewood definitely outshines Taggart, (perhaps as a reward for believing in Foley first). As the hero, Foley naturally eclipses them both.

That's not to say Taggart doesn't have any shiny moments of his own. Only, for the most part, his are delayed until *after* the villain is killed. That's when Taggart supports Bogomil's tall tale in order to protect Foley from their superior, Chief Hubbard.

Then, in the resolution, Taggart gives Foley a luxurious hotel bathrobe as a souvenir of Foley's Beverly Hills visit. Plus, Taggart agrees to go out for a beer with Foley.

In another story, the latter decision wouldn't be such a big deal, but because it's such a marked reversal from Taggart's prior behavior, it qualifies as a genuine shiny moment.

The Importance of Scale

Remember, your hero is supposed to be *sharing* the spotlight, not surrendering it completely. You need to achieve a balance between showcasing your protagonist's heroic mettle and that of his support system.

To do this, think not just in terms of proportion (the hero will have more screentime) but also in terms of scale (the hero will face larger obstacles).

In this respect (as well as others!), *LIVE FREE OR DIE HARD* is a great example to study. In the fourth installment of the popular franchise, hero John McClane is paired with a nervous hacker, Matthew Farrell.

Even though McClane is a larger-than-life character (some even describe him as “mythological”), during the climax, nerdy little Farrell doesn’t fade into the background.

Still, beat for beat, the scale (and visual impact) of McClane’s exploits surpasses Farrell’s:

- At the villain’s hideout, Farrell triggers an alarm to alert the FBI; McClane fights an armed sentry.
- Farrell infiltrates the villain’s mainframe and reprograms it; McClane dispatches an assassin who’s well-trained in the art of parkour.
- Farrell refuses (but eventually relents) to decrypt the code he installed on the villain’s computer; McClane has to survive an attack from a military jet.
- Farrell shoots a remaining henchman before the henchman tries to kill McClane; immediately prior, McClane kills the villain (who’s directly behind him) by shooting himself through a wound in his shoulder.

In sum, due to the power of scale, while audiences are well aware of Farrell’s shiny, heroic moments, they never forget that McClane is the true star of the picture. Although the spotlight flits between both characters, there’s no question as to who’s the real hero of the story.

We’ll return to the topic of scale in the last chapter. For now, we’ll focus our attention on a very special kind of shiny moment: the definitive action.

Taking the Definitive Action

While your protagonist should share the spotlight with his comrades, there's one shiny moment which is off-limits.

If you assign it to another character besides your hero—even if your hero has already accumulated a cornucopia full of shiny moments—you can wreck not only the climax but also your entire story.

See, it's not enough that at the climax, your protagonist directly faces off against his true antagonist. Again, assuming your hero emerges the victor, to truly deliver on your promises to audiences, to pay off your narrative debts in full, *your hero has to be the one who takes the definitive action which brings this central conflict to a close.*

If you assign this action to another character, then your hero becomes the person being rescued, rather than the one doing the rescuing.

At this crucial juncture, he switches from an active character to a passive one—from dazzling to dim. The result is an unfulfilling ending with a bitter aftertaste.

Sometimes, writers make this blunder out of sheer laziness. It's just easier for the protagonist's associate to do the heavy lifting. For the most part though, writers bungle up this part of the climax out of ignorance or misguided intentions.

The definitive action may consume only a few words on the page. Accordingly, it may seem insignificant, especially if everything else the hero has done is epic in scope.

As a result, writers can erroneously conclude that it's acceptable to bestow the definitive action upon a neglected supporting character who needs a shiny moment of his own.

To illustrate, let's return to *LIVE FREE OR DIE HARD*, aka *DIE HARD 4.0* (or even more simply, *DIE HARD 4*). Although Farrell's climactic exploits aren't as daring as McClane's, Farrell's heroism is additionally compelling to watch because it shows how much the hacker has changed as a result of his journey.

About halfway through the film, Farrell says that, unlike McClane, he's timid, neither heroic, nor brave. But at the climax, Farrell demonstrates that he's become "that guy," the person who steps up to the plate and does what has to be done, not because he wants to, but because there's no one else around to do it.

For many writers, it would've been tempting to have *Farrell*, as part of his transformation, shoot the villain, who, remember, has pinioned McClane against his own body.

On the surface, that ending may seem inordinately appealing. Farrell gets his arc, the villain gets vanquished, and the central conflict is resolved with nary a loose thread.

Plus, the action itself seems so small. McClane's already turned the parkour-loving henchman into ice chips. He's managed to survive an attack by an F-35 military jet.

Does McClane really need to be the one who makes the kill shot?

Well, yes—as long as you want him to maintain his heroic status—he does.

He can't suddenly transform into the dude in distress.

He's the hero.

Ergo, he does the rescuing.

Not the other way around.

Wait, you might be saying. Immediately afterwards, doesn't Farrell shoot the henchman who is about to shoot McClane? Doesn't McClane end up getting rescued by Farrell, after all?

He does. No disagreements there.

But here's the critical difference: McClane had *already* dispatched the true antagonist, the high-tech villain Gabriel. This is the definitive action which resolves the story's central conflict.

Hence, McClane rescues himself, fulfilling his duty as the story's hero, thus

creating an opportunity for someone else—like Farrell—to, if necessary, follow in McClane’s footsteps.

I like to think of this opportunity as an aftershock: a new threat which suddenly emerges just when it *seems* that the central conflict has been resolved and the story is headed towards the resolution. In some cases, dealing with this new threat technically may even be considered the definitive action of the climax.

But since it’s not on the same tier as the central protagonist-true antagonist climactic confrontation, it’s perceived differently.

It’s a bonus, not the main attraction.

In other words, the shiny moment it produces is up for grabs. No matter which character handles it, audiences will be delighted with the extra thrill it provides.

Indeed, the aftershock is a fantastic method to distribute shiny moments between your hero and his teammates. As a matter of fact, in my opinion, the climax of AVATAR would’ve been significantly stronger if writer and director James Cameron had used one more aftershock.

At the end of the film, Neytiri, not Jake, makes the kill shot which ends Colonel Quaritch’s life. (Okay, technically, she shoots two arrows with her bow.) To me, this choice isn’t very effective. Granted, it’s her planet being destroyed, her tribe being attacked, and her dad who died in the crossfire. (Her sister too, although that storyline was cut from the theatrical version.)

All the same, the film starts (and ends) with Jake. Audiences bond with him during the first act. They’re not even introduced to Neytiri until 32 minutes into the theatrical edition. Because of these choices, I think it’s fair to say that, between the two characters, this is really Jake’s story.

He’s the central protagonist, and he should really be the one to take down Quaritch, especially since Neytiri (and her mother) have already rescued Jake outright or interceded on his behalf multiple times.

In fact, right after Neytiri prevents Quaritch from slicing the throat of Jake’s avatar at the end of the climax, in an aftershock, she saves the life of Jake’s human body!

With this move, the balance of shiny moments gets majorly disrupted. Even though Jake's the central protagonist, and even though he demonstrates leadership skills and valor at the climax, he doesn't quite come across as heroic enough.

Neytiri, of course, is by no means unimportant. She deserves her fair share of shiny moments too. They just shouldn't overshadow Jake's. By having Jake make the kill shot *and* adding an additional aftershock for Neytiri, the film could've done justice to her stature, while still honoring Jake's role as the central protagonist.

For example, Quaritch could've suddenly come back to life after Jake believes he's fatally wounded Quaritch. Now, Neytiri can execute the kill shot which ends the colonel's life for real.

Admittedly, this option was perhaps closed to Cameron because it might've been too reminiscent of THE TERMINATOR. Nevertheless, I include this hypothetical variation because it's probably available to you!

Alternatively, like Farrell in DIE HARD 4, Neytiri could've fought off one of the colonel's soldiers, who unexpectedly charged into the forest just when Jake and Neytiri think they're safe.

Here's another possibility: Jake and Neytiri attack Quaritch simultaneously, (perhaps he with a knife, she with her bow and arrow), in the style of Riggs and Murtaugh's tandem takedown of Joshua at the end of the climax in LETHAL WEAPON. (Actually, I like to think of this tactic as "the R&M joint venture.")

No matter which variation is chosen, the end result is the same: Neytiri still gets her due, and Jake—jointly or solely—participates in the definitive action which brings the central story conflict to a close.

The Power of Surrender

Although your protagonist needs to take the definitive action against his true antagonist, it doesn't mean he has to kill this antagonist to end the conflict between them.

In certain situations, he can surrender the definitive action to another character (often the true antagonist himself), or in some cases, leave it to fortuitous

circumstances.

Like with the aftershock, the success of this choice can be attributed to perception. Because the protagonist's decision ultimately enables the definitive action to occur, he doesn't seem passive to audiences, even though he doesn't directly partake of the action itself.

For this to work in an action movie or thriller, the hero's moral code usually has to be explained to audiences before the definitive action takes place. He will demonstrate an unwillingness to kill, which makes it logical—perhaps even mandatory—for him to cede the definitive action to someone else.

For instance, Jason Bourne *was* an assassin, but he's not anymore. Although lethal, he kills only when absolutely necessary, not otherwise. Thus, in *THE BOURNE SUPREMACY*, it makes sense that he gives Abbott the choice to commit suicide rather than kill Abbott himself. Also, as Bourne says, his dead ex-girlfriend wouldn't want him to stoop to Abbott's level.

As previously mentioned, in *MINORITY REPORT*, Anderton's wife appropriates too many shiny moments, which makes him look passive in comparison. The climax's definitive action, however, is not one of them. Anderton voluntarily surrenders it to the archvillain, Burgess.

This, too, makes sense. Anderton has already resisted the impulse to murder the man who claimed to have abducted Anderton's son. In light of this previous scene, it would seem inconsistent for Anderton to succumb to murderous impulses now and kill Burgess at the climax.

Similarly, in *BATMAN BEGINS*, Bruce Wayne fails his initiation test into the League of Shadows because he refuses to kill a man whom he's told is a murderer. Later, at the climax, when Wayne (as Batman) faces off against the League's leader inside a monorail train car, Wayne once again refuses to kill his enemy outright.

Crucially, Wayne doesn't save his antagonist either, fleeing the scene as the train car plummets to the ground and explodes. In this case, the definitive action is Wayne's choice to allow circumstances to take their course rather than, as is typically the case, trying to control the circumstances himself.

Intentionally Passive Heroes

Generally speaking, passive heroes receive a lukewarm reception from audiences because such heroes are boring to watch. That's why you want to avoid *unwittingly* writing a story where your protagonist is primarily a passive character.

But, it's a different matter altogether if you're doing this purposefully, as part of his character arc. While your protagonist may start out passive, as a result of interactions with another character, he'll evolve from a doormat into a warrior.

The agent of change can manifest in a variety of forms, such as a spy with questionable motives (KNIGHT AND DAY), a ruthless hit man (COLLATERAL), or a corrupt cop (TRAINING DAY).

Even though audiences tend to eschew passive protagonists, in this particular story variant, audiences accept them, for the most part, without reservation. This is due to two main reasons.

First of all, the agent of change must, by definition, be an active character. Therefore, audiences are unlikely to become bored, as they would have if they had to rely solely upon the passive protagonist to entertain them.

Secondly, audiences tolerate this period of prolonged passivity based on their expectation that their patience will be rewarded. They anticipate a major turnaround.

At the climax, you better pony up and deliver.

You must truly demonstrate that your hero is active, not passive. Although that's true of most climaxes, in this case, because your hero has been passive for at least half of your story (if not more), the bar is raised.

Your climax must do heavy lifting: Atlas with the weight of the world on his shoulders.

That kind of lifting.

To put it another way, the climax has additional burdens to bear. It's not just the conclusive encounter whose outcome determines if the protagonist has succeeded at his goal or not.

It's your hero's prime opportunity to showcase his transformation. It's *your* prime opportunity to vindicate audience members who faithfully waited to witness it happen.

Don't turn them into fools.

Respect their trust.

Satisfy their expectations.

Make sure that your climax demonstrates—beyond a shadow of a doubt—that your hero has, in fact, changed.

That he's proactive, not reactive.

In this regard, it might be helpful to view your story as a trial, and your audience as the jury. Instead of a verdict of “not guilty,” however, you want audience members to render a verdict of “not passive.”

While they'll take into account all actions from your story as evidence during their deliberations, by virtue of positioning, the actions towards the end of your story have more weight. They're like the testimony provided by expert witnesses (although this might be stretching our analogy a bit!).

Note: this principle applies to other kinds of transformation stories. But instead of aiming for a verdict of “not passive,” you'd be focusing on another personality trait: “not shallow” (JERRY MAGUIRE, ABOUT A BOY, WHAT WOMEN WANT) or “not mean” (AS GOOD AS IT GETS).

Training Day: A Case Study

To reinforce many of the points in this chapter, let's inspect the climax of TRAINING DAY. Fair warning: this analysis is pretty lengthy. I'm keeping it that way, rather than shortening it, because I think it yields several instructive lessons whether your hero is intentionally passive or not.

To quickly recap, the agent of change in TRAINING DAY is an undercover narcotics officer (Alonzo), and the passive protagonist is a rookie cop (Jake).

Even though the film does an excellent job of showing how Alonzo manipulates Jake by preying on Jake's dreams of advancement, at the climax, when Jake is supposed to prove his metamorphosis, everything falls apart.

The ending is the weakest part of an otherwise strong film. It's so weak, it ruins the entire story.

Yes, the entire story.

To see how, we have to revisit the end of Act Two. Displaying strong signs of proactivity, Jake turns the tables on Alonzo. But then Alonzo lays a trap for Jake, who falls for it like an untutored naïf.

Taken together, the egregiousness of Jake's blunder (from earlier events, he knows better than to trust Alonzo), the severity of the penalty (Jake's almost killed by three gang members), and the contrivance of his extrication (although set up in advance, given the 24-hour time frame of the story, it, nevertheless, smells of fortunate coincidence) negate all prior signs of Jake's transformation.

Going back to our jury analogy, these details cancel out any evidence from Acts One and Two which hint at Jake's activeness. Thus, everything rides on the climax. The final verdict of "not passive" will be entirely determined by what transpires during Act Three.

It starts off with promise. Jake goes on the offensive, venturing into dangerous gang territory known as the Jungle, in order to find Alonzo. A brutal fight ensues.

So far, so good.

But then, for a brief moment, it seems as if Jake has died. Suddenly, he makes a miraculous recovery and jumps onto the hood of Alonzo's tricked-out 1979 Chevy Monte Carlo.

Uhm, no.

The bad guy can enjoy nine lives with the flimsiest of justifications (or, perhaps, no justification at all).

The hero, on the other hand?

He can't be the recipient of such good fortune. Not if you want to satisfy audiences, at any rate.

Sure, it's a double standard—but one which you must respect.

Jake's implausible recovery is an annoying contrivance. It's the first strike against the climax, but it's not the one which causes it (and ultimately the entire story) to keel over and die. That happens a little while later.

Jake and Alonzo reach a stalemate. It only gets broken when a gang member known as Bone retrieves his gun and trains it on Alonzo.

"Get up out of here," Bone says to Jake. "We got your back."

Say what?

That gesture and those words are problematic for multiple reasons. Prior to Jake's final showdown with Alonzo, Jake and Bone have barely interacted with each other, only sharing a wordless encounter which lasted all of two seconds. Jake has not cultivated a relationship with Bone; Bone has no allegiance to Jake.

Why would Bone help Jake now?

Bone's decision is made all the more incongruous because just prior, he slid his gun towards Alonzo and indicated he was completely comfortable with Jake dying as long as Alonzo did the dirty work himself.

Why did Bone abruptly reverse course?

Granted, an earlier scene alluded that Bone resents being manipulated by Alonzo. It can be argued that this sentiment explains why Bone decides to assist Jake at this critical juncture.

It does not, however, explain why Bone slid his gun towards Alonzo moments

before. (Nor why, two minutes afterwards, Bone apparently changes his mind.) But even if Bone's change of heart can be perfectly explained, it doesn't matter.

Jake is only able to walk away from Alonzo and extricate himself from Alonzo's clutches *because of Bone*.

This is HUGE.

It means that Jake is absolved of making the choice of killing Alonzo or not. Jake is ultimately saved, not through his own choices and actions, but through Bone's magical intervention.

Without it, Jake and Alonzo might still very well be staring each other down in the Jungle till they starved to death. (Or till the Russian mafia found Alonzo.)

The definitive action, therefore, has been handed to Bone instead of to Jake. This reinforces the idea that Jake is still passive.

Under ordinary circumstances, this choice would irritate audiences. But in a hero transformation plot like TRAINING DAY's, the impact is even worse.

The foundation of the story is built on the expectation that Jake will evolve into a more active character. This doesn't necessarily mean Jake has to kill Alonzo to prove his transformation, and thus satisfy audiences. Jake could surrender this action to an outside character—like the Russians who had put a bounty on Alonzo's head.

But Jake has to be the one who makes that happen. He has to bring about this conclusion himself, through his own actions, cleverness, and resourcefulness.

Remember, audiences didn't sit through the previous three-quarters of the film to witness Bone gain the upper hand over Alonzo. They waited patiently to see Jake finally gaining that advantage.

Since audiences didn't get that experience, in essence, they suffered through a passive protagonist for nothing. By failing to reward their patience, by not fulfilling their expectations, the climax undermines Jake's arc and wrecks the story as a whole.

You might be wondering why I'm harping so much on TRAINING DAY. It

earned \$76.6 million (domestic), a respectable amount, especially considering its relatively modest budget. Plus, it earned Denzel Washington an Academy Award.

How much did the ending really wreck the story?

That's a valid question which bears exploring. Let's tackle the money angle first. As a starting point, compare the opening (domestic) weekend grosses for TRAINING DAY (\$22.5 million) and COLLATERAL (\$24.7 million).

Comparable amounts. But their final box office receipts differ.

Vastly.

In the end, TRAINING DAY grossed \$76.6 million, while COLLATERAL went on to gross \$24.4 million more, breaking the \$100 million barrier.

This box office comparison wouldn't mean much if the films didn't share so many remarkable similarities. Like TRAINING DAY, COLLATERAL pits a psychopathic, yet strangely charismatic, agent of change against a primarily passive protagonist.

Both films take place over the course of one day in Los Angeles. They both end with the antagonist being killed in a manner he had tauntingly described to the protagonist earlier on.

In another striking parallel, these antagonists are played by talented actors, (Tom Cruise in COLLATERAL; Denzel in TRAINING DAY), who, by choosing the role of the bad guy, went against type.

Both screenplays are well-written (and well-directed). It's at the climax where the comparison begins to break down. While COLLATERAL aces its climax, TRAINING DAY ultimately fails to deliver.

Taking all these factors into account, it seems reasonable to conclude that the source of the difference in box office receipts could be connected to the difference in these films' endings.

Okay, we settled that. Let's move onto the Denzel issue.

Denzel somehow manages to exude charisma even when his character is at his most deceitful and offensive. Denzel's performance (and, let's be fair, Ethan Hawke's earnest one) compensated for the shortcomings of the climax.

If Denzel had phoned it in, if he hadn't been playing against type, if another actor had been chosen, we'd probably be looking at different results entirely: less buzz, less money, no Oscar.

The film would've been a ho-hum blip in the world of cinema, unlikely to be referenced several years after its release.

As a screenwriter, you shouldn't bank on Denzel playing Atlas.

You can't rely on actors to carry your story.

They're not supposed to do the heavy lifting.

You are.

(And if you're a novelist, there's no possibility of relying upon the actors at all!)

Here's the worst part: the vast majority of TRAINING DAY's screenplay carries its own weight, and doesn't try to skate by on the talent of the actors. The climax, on the whole, is gripping and powerful.

It's weakened by two little, seemingly innocuous, choices.

They took up one line of dialogue and three lines of description in the screenplay.

Two little choices. About 40 words total.

That's all.

In other words, in certain circumstances, even less than 1% of your story can undermine the remaining 99%. That tiny percentage can make the difference between a story which succeeds and one which fails, between a \$101 million box office take and one with \$24.4 million less.

Scary thought.

But after reading this book (* smile *), this won't intimidate you. You know exactly what to look for. You'll carefully scrutinize the definitive action, accord it its proper due.

You won't, as so many writers are prone to do, distribute it to another character. You'll set your story up for success and assign the definitive action to the proper person—your hero.

With this in mind, let's see how we could salvage the climax of TRAINING DAY so that it makes good on the promise of Jake's transformation, thereby rewarding audience patience and fulfilling their expectations.

While there are multiple tacks we could take, only one of them radically alters the story's outcome. Theoretically, Jake could, to borrow Alonzo's terminology, "become a wolf to catch a wolf."

If we opt for this route, we must commit wholeheartedly to a tragic ending. At the climax, Jake must turn a dark corner. In executing the definitive action, he'd have to become a cop-killer, shooting Alonzo in most dishonorable way possible—in the back.

When Alonzo dies, Jake might even taunt the gang member witnesses in a way which echoes Alonzo's own brash behavior. To drive the idea home, maybe Jake could even punctuate his speech with a wolf cry.

This solution is easy to implement, requiring very little alterations to the screenplay. The real difficulty lies in letting go of any attachment we might have to the happy ending.

Between happy endings and tragic ones, audiences tend to prefer the former. All things being equal, a happy ending will generally equate to greater commercial success. Yet, in this case, its sacrifice here may've produced better results, financially and otherwise.

Taking the tragic route would clearly establish Jake's transformation (albeit in a negative direction), and, like THE GODFATHER, yield an ending which is both powerful and provocative.

* * *

Admittedly, making assessments about activeness and passivity can be a tough call. This is especially true when you stumble across stories which ignore the guidelines in this chapter and still achieve widespread success.

Witnessing their popularity, you may—very reasonably—conclude that if you follow their model, you too, will be exempt from audience backlash.

Unfortunately, that's rarely the case.

Nine times out of ten, you're going to end up with a mess, not success.

The odds that your rule-breaking climax will satisfy, rather than disappoint, will increase, however, if your screenplay or novel contains certain mitigating factors.

Audiences might forgive a somewhat passive finale, if:

- You are not writing an action movie or a thriller.
- Prior to the climax, your protagonist has demonstrated an extraordinary level of activeness despite the difficulties of his situation.
- Your ending contains a special ironic quality which heightens its “feel-good” factor.

During the climaxes of 9 TO 5, HOME ALONE, and ERIN BROCKOVICH, each story's protagonist(s) behave passively to some extent. The hardworking heroines of 9 TO 5 are saved by Tinsworthy; Kevin is saved by Old Man Marley; and although Erin does shine in other respects, she doesn't enjoy a single shiny moment during the critical community hall meeting.

Yet, audiences didn't seem to mind. When released, all three films enjoyed incredible success (which continues to this day). All also contain the three mitigating factors described above.

Nonetheless, even if your ending shares these mitigating factors, be aware that you're walking a tightrope. Every editing choice (before and during the climax) carries more weight than it ordinarily would.

A seemingly insignificant detail can profoundly affect audience perception. They can easily walk away from your story feeling disgruntled, like you took the easy way out and tried to pay off your narrative debts with Monopoly money (a passive protagonist) instead of real tender (an active one).

Proceed with caution.

Be honest with yourself. Is this risk truly worthwhile to take? Or is it just a way to avoid a substantial rewrite?

If you're not sure, get an outside opinion from a writing buddy, script consultant, or professional editor. Safer still, stick to the traditional path.

Make your protagonist as active as possible.

Remove all signs of passivity from your climax.

Have your hero save himself.

Even so, whatever route you take, your job isn't over.

Not yet.

You still have to run your climactic sequence through two more quality control tests...

Quality Control Check #2: The Stakes

Simply put, stakes are the negative consequences of failure. If your protagonist doesn't achieve his goal, then bad things will ensue.

Stakes can make or break your story.

Yes, they're *that* important.

See, they compel audiences to emotionally invest in the outcome of the climax. Without them, no matter how proactive your protagonist is, the actions he takes at the climax wouldn't matter at all.

No one would care if your protagonist parachutes into the Coliseum, races to the top of the Empire State Building, or divests the bad guy of his big toe.

In other words, if nothing hangs in the balance, and your climax fails this quality control test, audiences will either be lukewarm towards, or completely disappointed by, the ending of your story.

On the other hand, if you understand how to wield stakes wisely, and your climax passes this quality control test, your screenplay or novel will be in a much stronger position to thrill and delight.

Even better, if you learn how to wield story stakes exceptionally well, you can go beyond paying off your narrative debts, and deposit a "surplus" into audiences' pockets—earning their enthusiastic seal of approval.

But first, you have to master the basics, so we're going to start there. For the sake of transparency, I want to mention that I've covered several of the points which I'm about to discuss in my writing guide, *Story Stakes*. However, in this book, I'm either using new examples, or illuminating new facets I didn't explore before.

So, even if you have read *Story Stakes*, this chapter won't be redundant. Hopefully, it will solidify and refine your understanding of how to use stakes at the climax for maximum effect.

And if you haven't read *Story Stakes*, and you want to know how to use stakes

in general, not just at the climax, you can learn more about this writing guide by clicking [here](#).

With that out of the way, let's begin your crash course in story stakes!

A Crash Course in Story Stakes

Once you've determined your story premise and your protagonist's goal, it's time for your muse to tackle the stakes.

Why should audiences care if your protagonist succeeds? Why does his goal even matter? What are the ramifications of failure?

Below, we'll discuss six possibilities to choose from...

6 Types of Story Stakes

While there's a whole bevy of stake types at your disposal (eleven by my count), as a basic overview, I'm going to describe the six which most frequently play a role at the climax.

1) Stakes of general protection

With these stakes, inhabitants of a certain location are in jeopardy. If the hero fails, this location will be destroyed and its citizens will be killed or enslaved.

2) Stakes of demise

In this variation, someone precious to the hero is in jeopardy. If the hero fails, this loved one will die.

Although the two are similar, notice there's a deeply personal aspect to stakes of demise which is missing from stakes of general protection.

3) Stakes of freedom

The outcome of the climax will enable the hero to maintain or regain his liberty, or the liberty of someone precious to him.

4) Stakes of livelihood

The outcome of the climax will enable the protagonist to keep or regain his job, or the job of someone precious to him.

These stakes are most resonant when your protagonist's job is more than just

about money. For example, he needs the income to provide for his children, pay the medical bills for his sibling, or to maintain a healthy sense of self-respect.

5) Stakes of justice

To put these stakes into play, the antagonist must perpetrate a truly heinous crime, against either the hero or another character. When the hero brings down the bad guy at the climax, justice will be served, and a fundamental wrong will be, to a certain extent, redressed.

As pertaining to the climax, these stakes are most effective when:

- the antagonist's crime is shown on-screen (or on the page)
- the crime is especially egregious (this will be, in large part, determined by genre)
- the time elapse between the commission of the crime and the beginning of the climax is brief

Unlike stakes of demise (or general protection), you have to really sell audiences on the idea of stakes of justice. You might not be able to do that if your hero has to engage in extremely risky actions at the climax.

If you're ever in doubt as to whether or not audiences are likely to buy into stakes of justice, you can always add new stakes to your story and sustain the climax by the prospect of averting the death of a character, rather than serving justice on behalf of someone who has already died.

6) Stakes of hero happiness

These stakes are found in the vast majority of comedies and romantic comedies, and in a fair number of romances.

Basically, your protagonist ties his personal happiness to the obtainment of some prize (love, a trophy, a promotion, etc). If he fails to win this prize, he'll be profoundly unhappy.

Similar to stakes of livelihood, when it comes to money, stakes of happiness are more powerful when the hero's happiness isn't just about bloating his bank

account.

If your story is about gaining a promotion, hunting for treasure, or pulling off a heist, keep this in mind.

The Likeability Issue

What if audiences really like your protagonist?

Won't they care about what happens to him? If he's in danger, won't they be worried about his safety?

Sure. As a matter of fact, the bond between audiences and your hero will be a critical factor in your story's success. (More on this topic in a bit.) Nevertheless, without stakes, your story will still fail to engage and your ending will still feel disappointingly anticlimactic.

Think of Harry Potter in *THE HALF-BLOOD PRINCE*. His major goal is to extract specific information from Professor Slughorn. Because audiences have gotten to know—and like—Harry over the course of five previous films, they certainly want him to succeed.

All the same, this fondness only goes so far. It doesn't inspire emotional involvement of great depth.

How can it?

If Harry fails, it's no big deal. There's nothing on the line, nothing hanging in the balance. If audience response hung solely on likeability, the story would've been a big fat flop.

But everything changes when stakes are added to the picture. Because audiences know Slughorn's memory could help Harry save the magical and Muggle world alike (stakes of general protection), their emotional involvement in the story's outcome is significantly heightened.

In this situation, the risks are fairly minimal. If Harry gets rebuffed by Slughorn, Harry's ego will get dented. That's all.

When the risks run higher, when heroes endanger their very existence, the

limitations of likeability become even more apparent.

To prove my point, let's take a look at a hypothetical scenario. It stars John, a dark-haired, handsome fellow. John runs red lights when he rides his Ducati, goes skiing despite an avalanche alert, and flies a helicopter in the middle of a thunderstorm.

But John's no exhibitionist. His risky behavior isn't pointless.

He's engaging in all of these dangerous activities in order to rescue a little boy named Timmy. Because of this, you're rooting for John every step of the way.

John also happens to be a waiter at your favorite restaurant. (In case you were wondering how John can afford his adventurous lifestyle on his waiter's income, the Ducati was inherited from the same uncle who paid for John's helicopter lessons.)

Moving on, John remembers that you like your water with lemon, no ice, and a straw. He gives you extra butter for your sourdough rolls without you having to ask. And, once or twice, he's managed to save you the last slice of cinnamon pumpkin cheesecake because he knows how much you love it.

John is a gem, and you really, really like him. But if Timmy's not in the picture—if there are no stakes attached to John's goal—how does that affect your perception of John's acrobatics?

What do you think of John's motorcycle rides, ski trips, and helicopter flights?

You like the guy. You definitely don't want to see John get hurt. On the other hand, without Timmy to rescue, John is recklessly endangering his life.

Now, he *has* transformed into an exhibitionist. There isn't any reason for him to perform these stunts except for the sake of his own vanity.

At the back of your mind, even if you try to suppress it, there's probably the nagging sense that John kind of deserves whatever it is he gets.

If you're of two minds about John, then your emotional investment is diluted. You're ambivalent. You're not wholly committed to what he does.

Audiences respond likewise.

When you take the stakes out of play, but keep your likeable hero in danger, audiences won't be fully invested in his plight. They'll know that beneath the surface, his actions are essentially pointless, contrived for their entertainment.

It will be harder for them to suspend their disbelief, to remain engaged. Although superficially exciting, your climax will feel strangely anticlimactic, and accordingly, it won't satisfy audiences. In short, it will fail this critical quality control test.

Don't get me wrong. Stakes and likeability, like conjoined twins, must co-exist with each other.

Even if your hero has a noble goal like saving little Timmy, if audiences don't particularly care for either one, their response can still be lackluster.

As a matter of fact, this is the topic of the next section of this chapter...

Keeping Audiences Connected to Your Story

For audiences to care about what transpires at the climax, they first need to care about a) your protagonist and b) the stakes.

You will accomplish these twin goals, in large part, by forging a bond between audiences and both the hero and the stakes during Act One.

Forging the Audience-Hero Bond

If audiences have bonded with your protagonist, they are, metaphorically speaking, willing to follow him wherever he goes.

They'll be interested in what he wants, and they'll care about whether he gets it or not. Consequently, assuming stakes are in play, they'll be riveted by the climax whose outcome will, once and for all, decide the fate of the hero they've invested so deeply in.

Happily, forging this bond is simple. During Act One, present audiences with emotional cues which inspire:

- empathy (they like your hero)
- sympathy (they feel sorry for him)
- fascination (they find him strangely compelling)
- a combination thereof

For instance, the opening of NOTTING HILL indicates that Will's wife divorced him for a Harrison Ford lookalike. Added to that, Will is saddled with both financial difficulties and an oddball roommate.

Plus, unlike the book thief who first tries to shoplift and then, afterwards, flirt with superstar Anna Scott, Will is gracious towards Anna and respectful of her privacy. Taken in conjunction, these cues cause audiences to bond with Will, and hence, emotionally invest in his quest to win Anna's heart.

While emotional identification with the protagonist is essential in *all* stories, it's especially critical in those, like NOTTING HILL, which revolve around stakes of hero happiness.

Audiences are going to care about whether the outcome of the climax brings the protagonist contentment (or not) only to the extent they care about him.

In other words, if you're writing this kind of story, then you need to select your bonding cues with extra care. They carry a lot of weight here.

If you're not writing this kind of story, a weak audience-hero bond, although not ideal, can be less detrimental. That's because audiences' emotional involvement can be supplemented by another source: their bond with the stakes.

Forging the Audience-Stake Bond

Oftentimes, when stakes of general protection are in play, the lives of several people—sometimes hundreds or thousands—are at stake. You'd think that audiences would automatically be emotionally invested in the plight of these characters.

You'd think so.

But they're not. This is a concept that beginners routinely fail to grasp.

If ten thousand people are about to die in a story, but each one of them is nameless and faceless, the danger feels fake.

If ten thousand people are about to die, but audiences have forged a bond with one or two of them, the danger—even though it's still fictional—feels real.

Quirky, but true.

So, if your villain threatens to destroy a specific place, make audiences fall in love with this place and its denizens. Portray this location as idyllic; present its people as likeable or sympathetic.

Here's one handy trick: in Act One, depict the stakes (both place and people) during a time of celebration. This was done to good effect in both *BRAVEHEART* and *THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING*.

To clarify, it's still a wise strategy to forge a bond between audiences and the stakes, even when the lives of only one or two people, not hundreds or thousands, hang in the balance.

Think about little Timmy from our earlier example. If audiences get to know and like him, they're going to be more emotionally involved in the mission to rescue him.

If Timmy is unlikeable, or if audiences are never given the chance to get to know him, even though Timmy's life is at stake, audiences aren't going to be as enthralled by the climax.

It should be noted, however, that audiences tend to instinctively respond to children (and animals) more than they do with adults.

Thus, as a child, Timmy has more latitude. Audiences are probably going to be caught up in his plight, even if they don't get to know him that well, or if he's mildly abrasive.

But if you want your stakes—whether child or adult—to be as emotionally resonant as possible, then you should take the time to forge a bond between them and audiences at some point prior to the climax.

Granted, there is some carryover from the audience-hero bond. For instance, in *BRAVEHEART*, it's easy for audiences to sympathize with Wallace, who was orphaned and widowed by the English. Because he cares about saving Scotland, audiences, having identified with him, will, by extension, be inclined to care about the fate of his homeland too.

All the same, if you want audiences to be riveted by the intensity of your climax, their feelings need to go beyond this general inclination.

The best way to achieve this, (as *BRAVEHEART* did through its beginning), is by forging a bond between audiences and the stakes which is distinct from the audience-hero bond.

[As Billy Wilder once told Cameron Crowe](#), “If you have a problem in the third act, the real problem is in the first act.” So, in some cases, if there's something off about your climax, tinkering with it (or with the construction of your antagonist) won't actually solve the problem.

Rather counterintuitively, you might need to redirect your editorial gaze from Act Three onto Act One—the ideal place to establish both the audience-hero bond and the audience-stake bond.

In fact, that's one of Act One's prime functions. If your first act is relatively short, this could be a sign that you haven't laid down enough of this crucial groundwork. You need to dedicate more of your screenplay or novel real estate to forging these critical bonds.

Conversely, if your first act is too long, don't eliminate the scenes which establish these bonds (unless, of course, these scenes are redundant). If you cut them out, even if your climax is brilliantly written, it can still fail to resonate.

Instead, try to whittle down the beginning of your story by relocating (or outright eliminating) expository exchanges and introductions to new characters. Much of what seems essential for audiences to know now can be conveyed at a later point, if it's indeed necessary for them to know at all.

Maintaining the Connection

Audiences' connection with the hero or the stakes isn't solely determined by the first act. Act Two (and sometimes Act Three) play a role too.

With regards to the audience-hero bond, this really does need to be established during Act One (preferably as soon as possible). Any later, and you'll have missed the boat.

If you're so inclined, you can, however, reinforce the audience-hero bond during Act Two. Because audiences spend so much time with your protagonist, it's not critical to do this, but when done well, it can certainly enhance your story.

As aforementioned, the bond between Will and audiences in *NOTTING HILL* is firmly established by the end of the first act. Afterwards, this bond is further strengthened when audiences discover that Will, years ago, had dated the woman who's now married to his best friend (ouch!), and furthermore, that she never actually fancied him. For her, kissing Will was like kissing her ears (double-ouch!).

Having already emotionally aligned themselves with Will, audiences are bound, after his midpoint split with Anna, to feel unhappy on his behalf. Knowing these details from his backstory deepens this sympathy, paving the way for a richer emotional experience.

With regards to the audience-stake bond, for whatever reason (time restraints, story structure), its creation may have to be delayed until the second act, although ideally it, like the audience-hero bond, would be established during Act One.

In either case, Act Two can be used to remind audiences about the stakes. This is important. Audiences aren't going to be that invested in the climax, when the hero is fighting tooth and nail to save the stakes, if audiences have forgotten about the stakes altogether!

To illustrate, let's return to *DIE HARD*. About halfway through the movie, Holly waltzes into her office—which Gruber has appropriated as his headquarters—and champions the comfort of a pregnant colleague.

Does this scene advance the plot?

No. Not at all.

True, you could argue that it sets up Gruber's eventual realization that Holly is McClane's wife. But given later events, this setup isn't necessary.

Yet, this scene is not decorative either. Through Act One, audiences have become well-acquainted with Holly. But, approximately thirty minutes have transpired since they've last seen her. Without this critical reminder, audiences could forget about what McClane is fighting so hard to protect.

That's not all. This scene tremendously boosts Holly's own likeability quotient. Managing to extract concessions from Gruber, she's just as much of a badass as her husband (albeit in a different way).

Hence, because of their connection to Holly, audiences are even more invested in McClane's success—now and at the climax—than they would've been if the film had solely relied upon their bond with McClane himself.

Take note. This is the kind of scene which beginners routinely neglect to include. Content to create heroes like McClane and villains like Gruber, these writers don't dedicate enough time to show audiences why all of these hero-villain clashes matter. A pro, on the other hand, never underestimates the power of the stakes.

In addition to Act Two, you can also boost your hero's likeability and remind audiences about the stakes during Act Three.

Take *OUT OF SIGHT*. Having found the stash of uncut diamonds in Ripley's mansion, Jack has obtained what he wanted. He can safely leave the premises with Buddy. Instead, Jack re-enters the mansion to rescue Ripley's girlfriend.

Replacing stakes of hero happiness, these stakes of demise not only continue to sustain the climax, they substantially boost Jack's quotient of likeability. If audiences didn't want to see Jack killed or arrested before, with this good deed, they really wouldn't want to see him go down now.

This is rather uncommon, however. Writers rarely increase a protagonist's likeability during the climax, leaving this writing goal to other sections of their story.

More frequently, they choose a different approach: they heighten audience investment by cutting away to the stakes in the midst of the climax. As Peter Jackson observes in the commentary of the special extended DVD edition of *THE TWO TOWERS*:

"The editing of the civilians in the caves was something we did at the last minute. We actually didn't have it in our script for instance...but when it came together, it became very apparent to us that the battle was going to gain more power if you really juxtapose the preparations for battle with the frightened women and children. It gives the battle a purpose really, beyond just defending a stone castle. You're obviously now defending the women and children, and in a sense, the future of your own race."

The tactic proved to be so successful that Jackson employed it again in *THE RETURN OF THE KING*. In his own words:

"We took a lead off our Helm's Deep experience from *THE TWO TOWERS* and tried to have the civilians under attack as much as the soldiers because you feel more emotion once you see civilians running and panicking than you do with soldiers getting hurt."

In short, when you're writing a huge action scene, don't focus exclusively on the protagonist combatants. To make your climax even more effective and evocative, occasionally shift the focal point of the battle to the stakes

themselves.

Admittedly, it's easier—and more accepted—to cut away to the stakes during the climax of a screenplay than of a novel. Also, keep in mind that this technique tends to be most successful when these intra-climax cutaways are supplemented by stake reminders in Act Two.

To quickly recap, clever storytellers don't permit audiences to forget about the stakes, so that when the climax begins, audiences remain fully engaged and invested in this final confrontation, whose outcome will determine the fate of the stakes once and for all.

Keeping the Stakes in Play

Once the stakes are taken out of play, and nothing hangs in the balance, the climax is over.

No exceptions.

It doesn't matter what's transpiring on-screen or on the page. Without stakes, everything that's happening is *anticlimax*.

Bearing this in mind, there's one subtle nuance that you really have to watch out for, and which we briefly touched on earlier in this chapter: your hero's life can be in danger, but *not* at stake.

Say, for instance, he's fighting off bad guys like a one-man army. This is exciting stuff. Your hero could get killed at any second! You might conclude that there's no way this sequence could feel anticlimactic.

But before you draw that conclusion, first trace your hero's motivation.

Why is he in this situation in the first place?

If your hero is recklessly endangering his life for no good reason, if, technically, he *could* walk away from the situation, audiences will, either consciously or subconsciously, sense this.

They'll realize that all of this action is, essentially, meaningless.

Pointless.

Anticlimactic.

After being initially caught up in the dazzle of it all, audiences will tune out and disengage.

That's not to say that they necessarily want to see your hero walk away, nor for that matter, do they want to see him lose. Nonetheless, their emotional engagement is not going to be as deep as you intended.

Despite all of its daredevilry, your climax will not be as gripping or enthralling as you might believe.

Without stakes, you have spectacle. With them, you have story.

To summarize, if you conflate danger with stakes, you can erroneously conclude that stakes are in play at the climax—when they are not—and inadvertently end up with a ton of anticlimax in your third act. This will bore and disappoint your audience, clearly an undesirable outcome.

If this hefty portion of anticlimax is trailed by a lengthy resolution, then your problems are compounded. Since a tiny sliver of climax can't support all of this dead weight, your third act will buckle and collapse—taking the rest of your story down with it.

The anticlimax-busting tips, below, should help you avoid this disaster:

1) Keep the stakes in harm's way for as long as possible

Keep the damsel—whoever or whatever the stakes are—in distress till the last possible second.

This probably seems like a “no-duh” solution. But it needs to be explicitly mentioned because many writers have the tendency to remove the stakes from danger *prematurely*.

If you've come to strongly identify with the stakes, you need to overcome your natural inclination to protect them and keep them *in* harm's way—at least, until you want the climax to officially end.

Even with stakes of hero happiness, where no one's going to die, you can still fall prey to this inclination and award your hero his prize far too soon.

Resist this tendency; draw out the suspense.

Keep the climax, well, climactic.

Delay your protagonist's success...

...until you think audiences have reached their tipping point. Even with stakes

in play, an overly long climax can, nevertheless, wear out its welcome and become anticlimactic.

We'll revisit the topic of duration in the next chapter, but for now, let's move onto the next anticlimax-busting tip...

2) Brevity makes for an effective compromise

Once you bring your stakes to a place of safety, your hero could *briefly* battle the bad guy without it coming across as anticlimactic.

For instance, after rescuing the damsel in distress, your hero could finish off the villain with a few quick ripostes. However, he shouldn't engage in an elaborate duel.

3) If necessary, you can always reframe the dynamic

Remember, you run into issues of anticlimax when the hero pursues the bad guy—and there's nothing at stake.

But if you reframe the dynamic, things change. If your villain has been pursuing your hero throughout the second act, then your hero *can't* walk away from the dangers of the climactic battle. It's the only way to end his persecution.

Intriguingly, at the climax, your hero's life will be both in danger *and* at stake.

In *THE BOURNE IDENTITY*, Bourne must go after Conklin. It's the only way for Bourne to get the dude off his back. In *SNOW WHITE AND THE HUNTSMAN*, Snow has to take down Ravenna because the evil queen will never let the princess live in peace.

Notice that in these two examples, the protagonist goes on the offensive during the climax. As an alternative, your villain could maintain his pursuit of the hero, so that your hero would be on the defensive at the climax.

Again, his life would be both in danger and at stake, but this time, you run into a minor hitch. Your hero would be adopting a stance which, although not anticlimactic, is passive in tenor, and thus, reduces the overall quality of the climax.

Happily, there's a simple solution for this: strengthen your hero's agency by giving him a goal *besides* surviving the villain's onslaught.

That's exactly what the filmmakers did in *THE BOURNE SUPREMACY*. The climax isn't just about Bourne surviving Kirill's relentless attack. Bourne needs to survive it in order to apologize to a young woman who was orphaned by Bourne's earliest assassination assignment.

This screenwriting choice doesn't just make Bourne look more active. As an added benefit, it deepens the emotional resonance of the stakes. If Bourne fails, he won't just die. Tragically, he'll also lose the chance to make amends to the orphaned woman.

This example illustrates an important point. Although *BOURNE* managed to arrive at a successful solution, sometimes, addressing one storytelling problem (like a lack in stakes) can create another problem (like a passive protagonist).

In some cases, the new problem might even be worse than the original one it eliminated!

This is especially true at the climax. So...be on your guard.

Analyze the drawbacks associated with your original choices as well as the repercussions potentially created by your new improvements. You don't want to pay off one of your narrative debts, only to incur another.

4) Put new stakes into play

If you take one set of stakes out of play, you can keep the climax going by putting a new set, (which you've perhaps kept in reserve for this very purpose), into play.

That way, audiences will be in suspense about the outcome of your story till you reach the last set of stakes in your rotation cycle. This is a sound strategy to craft a sustained story climax, sure to thrill and delight audiences.

It's also an excellent method to exceed audience expectations and deposit a "surplus" into their pockets. But, before we get into that topic, there's one issue we still have to address:

The Necessity of Restricting Power and Magic

It can be a lot of fun to write the kind of story where it's permissible for your protagonists to be blessed with paranormal, magical, or super powers.

All the same, don't get too carried away.

Make sure that you spend an adequate amount of time a) devising limits to these special powers, and then, b) determining how to expediently convey these limits to your audience.

Why is this important?

If there are no limits to your hero's special abilities, then logically, everything should come easy to him.

Yawn.

It's the challenges your hero faces and overcomes which make a story interesting.

As discussed in the first chapter, this thorny issue becomes particularly problematical at the climax. If your hero is invincible, then he can just mow down the bad guys and save the stakes.

Certainly, nothing to fuss over.

Since your hero is basically omnipotent, his success is never in doubt. Hence, the stakes—even if they're kept in play till the last possible second—won't generate any tension.

Accordingly, a climax filled with the most stunning of action stunts will feel—say it with me—anticlimactic. It will neither thrill nor delight.

But once you add limits into the equation, everything changes.

Now that your hero has a weak spot, there's a very real possibility that he could be harmed, or suffer other kinds of loss, during his mission. Audiences will be at the edge of their seats—right where you want them!

This holds true even if audiences are banking on a happy ending. They'll still be under tension because they don't know *how* your rule-bound hero will overcome his antagonist.

According to some [CNN movie critics](#), the Battle of the Pelennor Fields in THE RETURN OF THE KING is one of the greatest movie battles of all time. That is, until the Army of the Dead arrives. Then, this epic battle falls apart. To quote:

“The staunch resistance of the Men of Gondor and the Rohirrim’s endeavors on the battlefield are all rendered utterly pointless when the Army of the Dead swoop in at the end. Couldn’t they have turned up a bit earlier? An oversimplified cop out.”

I disagree.

Vehemently.

Bringing in the Army of the Dead sooner would’ve been an unmitigated disaster.

Since the ghosts are already dead, they can’t be killed. They are an unstoppable force. Once they enter the picture, they guarantee victory. No one in the audience would be under tension during the battle sequence—as stupendous as it is—not when success is thus assured.

Delaying the arrival of the Army of the Dead was not a cop out; it maintained the power of the stakes, and in doing so, prevented the climax from becoming anticlimactic.

This is also why it was essential for Aragorn to release the Army of the Dead from their vow to serve him *before* the heroes advance to the Black Gate of Mordor. The ensuing standoff with Sauron’s armies as well as Frodo’s ascent into Mount Doom wouldn’t have been very gripping if invincible help was just around the corner.

You might be wondering if the Army of the Dead robs the power of the stakes, why introduce them into the story at all?

It all goes back to giving your audiences an emotional roller coaster ride.

At some point during the climax, the good guys should be at a significant disadvantage so audiences can become *keenly* worried about the characters' safety. That intensifies the "down" part of audiences' ride, giving them a deeper and more satisfying emotional experience.

But, at the same time, (assuming victory), the protagonists also need a believable way to win. If the good guys don't *credibly* overcome their challenges, then the audiences' roller coaster ride will feel like a cheat, and consequently, lose its appeal.

In the case of THE RETURN OF THE KING, the protagonists were vastly outnumbered. In order to make their eventual victory believable, their level of power had to be temporarily strengthened by the Army of the Dead.

(And yes, I realize this was yet another example from THE LORD OF THE RINGS. What can I say? The trilogy is chockablock with great storytelling lessons.)

Notice that the reverse doesn't hold true for antagonists: when they're all-powerful, the stakes don't get robbed of their power.

On the contrary, invincible villains amplify story tension.

Despite this, you still need to devise an Achilles heel for your bad guy. Otherwise, again, your hero's eventual victory will be difficult to swallow, and hence, fail to satisfy.

PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: THE CURSE OF THE BLACK PEARL is a good model to aspire to. Cursed, the pirates in PEARL, like the Army of the Dead, cannot be killed. Because they're the bad guys, not the good guys, their climactic showdown with the Royal Navy is still filled with tension and suspense.

Once Captain Jack Sparrow also becomes cursed, he's as invincible as his opponent, Captain Barbossa. Their ensuing détente, intriguingly, creates an odd breeding ground for humor in the midst of the climax.

In the end, both the Navy and Jack defeat their antagonists. But their victories don't strain credibility at all. At this point, it's been well-established what needs to be done to break the curse.

The last remaining coin needs to be returned to the treasure chest from whence it came and a blood sacrifice must be extracted from the proper individual. Both the valuable coin and the much-needed blood are close at hand. It's just a matter of getting them into the chest, as Jack would say, "at the opportune moment."

What if your magically-endowed protagonist doesn't have to engage in a physical battle? If you want to maintain tension during the climax, then in this circumstance too, you must find a way to remove his special powers before the climax begins.

Look at *WHAT WOMEN WANT*. Nick has been blessed (or cursed, depending on your point of view) with the magical ability to hear women's voices. At the climax, he must repair relationships with three different women: a suicidal colleague, his teenage daughter, and his former boss/love interest.

If Nick was still in possession of his magical ability, he'd know exactly what to say to help each of these women. Similar to having the Army of the Dead on his side, Nick's victory—and happiness—are virtually assured.

Therefore, for some degree of tension to permeate the climax, he must be divested of his special power. By being "weakened" in this way, he's on equal footing with the three women; he's as vulnerable as they are. This makes it more difficult for him to accomplish his objectives—and much more entertaining and enjoyable for audiences to watch.

Notice that removing Nick's magical ability also strengthens his character arc. To have solid proof of his transformation into a genuinely sensitive human being, audiences must witness him demonstrating this sensitivity *without* the aid of his special power.

How to Use Stakes to Create 6 Kinds of Aftershocks (and *Really* Dazzle Audiences!)

As we briefly covered a few paragraphs ago, putting a new set of stakes into play is a solid strategy to craft a sustained story climax which thrills and delights.

To produce an even more powerful effect, you can take this basic model one step further and generate an aftershock.

To quickly recap, an aftershock is a new threat which puts the stakes, the hero, or both in jeopardy once more—just when it seems the central conflict has been resolved and your story is headed towards its resolution (typically happy).

The illusory resolution is a key component of the aftershock. It temporarily tricks audiences into believing the protagonist(s) are safe and/or successful—if only for a few seconds.

Since audiences think their ride is over, when the new threat emerges, it produces a surprise which is deeply satisfying, precisely because it's so unexpected.

Actually, the aftershock, (whether brief or more extensive), is one of the most effective ways to make audiences feel like you've gone beyond paying off your narrative debts and deposited a "surplus" of entertainment into their pockets.

To provide *your* audience with one extra thrill—and give them another reason to wax enthusiastic about your story—try employing one of the following six aftershock variants:

1) Have a henchman make a last ditch effort to kill your hero

After your protagonist has dealt with his true antagonist, assuming victory, your protagonist has achieved his goal. Naturally, audiences will be inclined to believe you're going to segue into the resolution of your story.

Surprise them. Have a henchman make a bold—an unexpected—attempt to end

your hero's life.

DIE HARD is a classic example. After McClane rescues his wife from Hans Gruber, we think the McClanes are going to enjoy well-deserved respite (at least until the couple starts to argue with each other again).

The story seems to be at the resolution stage, when, out of nowhere, Gruber's prime henchman, Karl, emerges, vengeance in his eyes. For a brief moment, McClane's life is at stake, before McClane is saved (in a very satisfying payoff) by Powell.

Another great henchman aftershock can be found in THE BOURNE IDENTITY. After Bourne tells off Conklin, it appears that Bourne is on his way towards enjoying, at the very least, a semi-peaceful life.

Then, a CIA operative emerges from the shadows. As previously discussed, although it seems like the operative is there to kill Bourne, his real target is Conklin. The addition of misdirection makes this particular aftershock doubly enjoyable.

That being said, you don't have to go to such lengths to generate a successful aftershock. As we already covered, in DIE HARD 4, Farrell takes out a henchman who was about to shoot at McClane. Unlike Karl and the CIA operative, neither this henchman's existence, nor his intentions was ever in any doubt.

2) Allow the villain to enjoy a miraculous comeback

In contrast to the above option, the villain, not his henchman, is the star of this particular aftershock variant. Usually, the villain will be incapacitated in some way. He'll be fatally shot or perhaps handcuffed.

Either way, audiences believe the danger's over. Likewise, the hero, thinking he is safe, will turn his back on the villain, who—BOOM!—will maliciously take advantage of this opportunity to take down the hero (even when doing so wouldn't improve his own circumstances at all).

As a theoretical example, let's rewrite the ending of DIE HARD 4. Hypothetically, Gabriel could, despite McClane's last gunshot, garner enough strength to aim at McClane one last time. (Remember, unlike heroes, villains

can survive seemingly fatal injuries on the flimsiest of pretexts.)

Similar to the film version, Farrell could then step in and save McClane's life. Because McClane has already unequivocally proven himself against Gabriel, Farrell's additional moment of heroism won't be produced at the expense of McClane's own glory.

There's another variation of this aftershock, one which can only be employed in "save the day" stories, where your hero can stop the villain's nefarious plan without directly confronting the villain himself. The aftershock, then, enables you to engineer this direct confrontation.

In *SPEED*, for instance, once Jack rescues the hostages aboard the bus, the story could've ended there. Jack and Annie even get their happy ending kiss. Still, Jack hasn't directly confronted the villain, Payne, which, for reasons we discussed earlier on, necessitates another encounter.

If Jack had pursued Payne with nothing hanging in the balance, then no matter how action-packed this sequence is, it would potentially feel anticlimactic. To avoid this, the film puts new stakes into play. Payne takes Annie hostage, and these stakes of demise fuel the aftershock.

3) Destroy the infrastructure

New peril doesn't have to come from the bad guys; it could arise from unstable surroundings instead.

After your heroes achieve their victory, surprise them—and audiences—by an environment which is suddenly about to self-destruct.

Look at *STAR TREK*. The majority of the climax is fueled by stakes of general protection, overlaid by stakes of justice. If Kirk and Spock fail to stop Nero, Earth will be destroyed, and Spock will not be able to avenge his murdered mother.

When the two protagonists accomplish this laudable goal, those stakes are taken out of play. It seems like the heroes are just about to enjoy their well-deserved happy ending, when, in a surprise aftershock, the gravitational pull from a black hole puts the lives of everyone aboard the starship *Enterprise* at stake.

Through a bright idea from Scotty, the starship escapes from the gravitational pull, and the story proceeds to its resolution right on schedule.

Keep in mind that a self-destructing environment isn't limited to an aftershock. You can expand upon the concept so that it becomes a key component of your central climactic sequence.

4) Put your hero on life support

After your hero confronts—and hopefully conquers—his true antagonist, reveal that although the battle is over, your hero might not survive to enjoy the fruit of his labors.

As already discussed, this aftershock was used to create an additional surprise in AVATAR. After Jake and Neytiri finally defeat Quaritch, Jake's human body is deprived of oxygen, putting it and his avatar in jeopardy.

As a generic example, this could be the moment when you show audiences that the injuries which the hero incurred in the midst of battle are more extensive than originally presented.

Perhaps, the extent of the damage was always apparent, but now, when audiences believe your hero will recover (as is typically the case), you reveal that he will not.

Here's another alternative which produces a similarly poignant ending: combine this aftershock with one of the variants above.

In other words, after your hero thwarts the bad guys, audiences will temporarily believe that he will return to his everyday world. But when a new threat emerges, it becomes clear that he will have to sacrifice his life to save the lives of other characters (co-protagonists, his own mass people, etc).

As an example, study the extended climax of X2: X-MEN UNITED, which contains multiple aftershocks. The protagonists have saved Professor Xavier, and stopped Stryker's evil plans—and in a surprise twist—Magneto's too.

It seems that they will be able to fly away with their team intact (well, minus one member who voluntarily abandoned them). However, as their environment crumbles around them, their jet malfunctions. As a result, one of them must

sacrifice her life to save those of her fellow mutants.

5) Reveal an ally is a wolf in sheep's clothing

For instance, the true antagonist could embed one of his henchmen within the protagonist's world. In disguise, the henchman fools the protagonist into believing that the henchman is the protagonist's ally.

But after the protagonist confronts the true antagonist, right when audiences are breathing sighs of relief, you pull the rug from underneath their feet and finally reveal the henchman's true identity.

Frankly, to keep this ruse going will require extra effort on your part—much more so than aftershock variant #1, where audiences know the henchman is a bad guy all along.

Nevertheless, your diligence will likely yield major dividends, as audiences will greatly appreciate this last-minute surprise—as well as the skill it takes to pull off.

If you're feeling ambitious and want to append this aftershock to your climax, study *HARRY POTTER AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE* which executes it (and the groundwork it entails) with enviable brilliance.

In this example, the traitor is just a henchman, not the mastermind behind the plan. As such, revealing his true identity doesn't incur the problems, (discussed a few chapters ago), which are associated with revealing the archvillain's identity at this late stage of your story.

Regardless of these problems, you might be tempted to delay the revelation of the archvillain's true identity for as long as possible. Not necessarily as an aftershock, but as a surprise within the climax itself.

If, despite my warnings, you want to try your hand at it anyway, study *SALT* and *THE DARK KNIGHT RISES* to see how to reveal this kind of surprise without weakening the overall effect of the climax.

6) Find a way to curtail your hero's happiness

If your story is not filled with action stunts, don't fret. You can still craft a

thrilling aftershock without, like variants #1 – #5, endangering your hero's life. Instead, allow him to savor victory—and then abruptly snatch it away.

This, you'll note, puts the hero's happiness into question once more, which puts the stakes into play once again.

As a model to emulate, study BRIDGET JONES'S DIARY. At the end of the climax, Darcy arrives on Bridget's doorstep. It appears like they're—finally!—going to get together.

Their happy ending is seemingly around the corner, when Darcy discovers Bridget's diary, which is filled with mean misconceptions about him.

It's a brilliant surprise no one would see coming. Considering its genre—which is well known for its predictable endings—this is an extraordinary feat, elevating this rom-com climax above the rest of the pack.

Perhaps, an aftershock will do the same for yours!

* * *

This seems a good time to reiterate an important point: if necessary, the aftershock can be used to compensate for weaknesses within the climactic sequence which precedes it.

In some stories, like SPEED, the aftershock may be the only logical way to strengthen your climax and fully pay off your narrative debts. Without it, audiences would probably be dissatisfied by the ending of your screenplay or novel.

In other kinds of stories, the aftershock is completely optional. You could easily satisfy audiences by crafting an extended climax *without* using aftershocks to keep it going.

Even so, if you find yourself in that position, you may want to consider *going out of your way* to create an aftershock by inserting an illusory resolution somewhere in this sequence.

Why?

It all goes back to exceeding audience expectations, so they walk away from your story feeling like you've gone beyond fulfilling your narrative debts and deposited a "surplus" into their pockets.

Think of your attitude towards Christmas presents.

A thrilling, but aftershock-free climax is like receiving six awesome presents for Christmas (when you had been expecting six).

A thrilling climax *with* an aftershock, on the other hand, is like receiving seven awesome Christmas presents (when, again, you had only been expecting six).

See the difference?

The aftershock creates an *extra* surprise, which in turn, elicits greater delight!

In addition to generating aftershocks, stakes can also be used, along with other elements, to make your climax feel like the most momentous part of your screenplay or novel.

Passing this quality control test is the topic of our next, and final, chapter.

Quality Control Check #3: Escalation

Everything about a penthouse suite—from its location, size, cost, and décor—signals to guests that it’s the most special room in the entire hotel.

And so it goes with your climax.

Here, it’s not enough to bring the conflict between your protagonist and his true antagonist to a close. It’s not enough for your protagonist to resolve this conflict actively, while something hangs in the balance.

To fulfill your contract with audiences in spirit as well as in letter, to truly pay off your narrative debts, to ensure your story climax makes the grade, you have to go further than that.

The climax shouldn’t feel like an ordinary sequence, just like the way the penthouse doesn’t feel like the average hotel room. It shouldn’t merely bring your story to a logical close. It should also be grandiose enough to reward audiences for sticking around till the very end.

In short, it should feel so epic (as defined by genre) that it eclipses all the scenes which precede it.

To see why passing this quality control test is so important, let’s play around with our penthouse suite analogy a little bit. Imagine you’re on vacation in Hawaii (lucky duck!), and you’ve been led to the penthouse suite at a beachside hotel. (You didn’t book it, but management said they decided to give you a complimentary upgrade.)

The suite, needless to say, is amazing.

It has a gorgeous view of the beach. Although a California king dominates the bedroom, your sleeping quarters are still spacious. The bathroom features “his and her” sinks; its floor is made of pink marble.

As testament to the hospitality extended to penthouse suite guests, the living room desk is graced by a large gift basket, filled with ripe pears, raw honey, roasted almonds, dark chocolate, and aged cheese (all organic).

With a sigh of happiness, you move towards your suitcase. You're just about to unpack, when a manager rushes into the suite. He tells you (quite apologetically, of course) that there's been a mistake. The penthouse suite has been booked; it cannot be given to you as an upgrade.

He quickly leads you to a different room, the one you originally reserved. There's a queen bed, instead of a California king. There's no marble in the bathroom, no gift basket on the desk.

Nevertheless, this room is still beautiful. The view is lovely; the bedding is luxurious. If you had been led to this room first, you would've been satisfied. But since you had been led to it *after* experiencing the charms of the penthouse suite, you feel disappointed.

When your climax doesn't outshine previous scenes, when it doesn't feel special and momentous when compared to what comes before it, audiences respond likewise.

For them, your grand finale will fail to meet their expectations. It will be disappointing—anticlimactic. They will walk away from their experience feeling like your story peaked too early.

That's only one part of the picture. To see the whole part, we'll have to modify your hypothetical Hawaiian adventure. This time, you were led to the queen room right away, with no detour into the penthouse suite.

However, for the tail end of your ten-day stay, management generously decides to bestow you with an upgrade. For the three remaining days of your trip, you get to enjoy the luxuries of the penthouse suite.

By ending on this high note, your vacation has gone from enjoyable to exceptional. Accordingly, you're bursting with enthusiasm to recommend this hotel to everyone you know.

Audiences have a similar reaction when the climax of your screenplay or novel feels escalated in comparison to the events which precede it. Because the climax has passed this critical quality control test, *your* story is the one they're most likely to recommend to their friends.

There are two other variations of our hotel analogy which we haven't

addressed yet: you could spend all ten days in the queen room, or all ten days in the penthouse suite.

The former can be dismissed out of hand without detailed explanations. The latter, in contrast, requires more attention. Wouldn't it be awesome to spend your entire vacation in the penthouse suite instead of a mere three days?

Sure, it would be. But, humans are complicated creatures. Having gotten habituated to their luxurious penthouse lifestyle, they're liable to take it for granted by the end of their stay.

In other words, if put into this situation, you'd probably be *more* enthralled with your vacation had you received the upgrade—and your Hawaiian hotel experience *progressively* improved—than if you had spent all ten days in the penthouse, and your hotel stay was consistently wonderful throughout.

Audiences respond the same way to stories.

They want to experience an “upgrade.”

Let's face it. You've got more competition than the hotels in Hawaii. There are thousands of screenplays and novels out there. To stand out, you must wow your audience; you must knock their socks off.

You must deliver a story which becomes progressively more amazing.

Via escalation, you must put the “grand” in grand finale.

I'll be the first to admit, this is easier said than done. Of all the quality control tests, escalation is the hardest one to pass.

Knowing what to look for is half the battle. In particular, as part of your winning strategy, pay attention to these four elements of escalation:

- stakes
- contrast
- scope
- duration

That's exactly what we're going to do in this chapter. Hopefully, the tips presented here will help you polish up a lackluster climax so that it sparkles enough to thrill and delight the most jaded of audience members.

So, let's get started...

Escalation Element #1: Stakes

It's time to make an obvious point we didn't cover in the preceding chapter: scenes with *less* hanging in the balance aren't, in comparison, going to feel as weighty as scenes with *more* hanging in the balance.

To put it another way, raising the stakes is one reliable way to escalate your climax. To accomplish this, consider employing one (or both) of the two surefire strategies discussed below:

Make Your Hero Put Some Skin into the Game

Since audiences spend so much time with your hero, and since the vast majority of their experience is filtered through his point of view, (assuming he hasn't alienated them in some way), audiences are going to share the deepest connection with him.

This means that no matter how grandiose your general stakes are, no matter how ardently you try to forge a strong bond between them and audiences, *audiences are never going to emotionally invest in them to the degree they invest in your hero.*

By extension, with the exception of stakes of hero happiness, stakes which *personally* affect your hero are going to be much more emotionally resonant than those which do not. They're just naturally more evocative.

Think about it for a second. Which is more emotionally involving for audiences: to watch the hero rescue the governor's daughter before she is killed (stakes of general protection)...or to watch him rescue her, knowing that she is his wife (stakes of demise)?

This storytelling truth creates a foolproof method to escalate the stakes, and correspondingly, the climax. Although you may begin your story with general stakes in play, eventually, you must find a way to make the stakes more personal for your hero.

Even if the negative consequences of failure would affect an entire galaxy, don't stop there.

Find a way for your hero's failure to *directly* affect him.

As a starting point, you can enhance the emotional resonance of general stakes by showing their relationship to the hero. While all of Middle-earth is threatened in *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*, in the films, the emphasis is on the Shire—the place whose devastation would hurt Frodo the most.

Similarly, in the *HARRY POTTER* series, even though Voldemort threatens the wizarding and non-magical world alike, oftentimes, his impact on Hogwarts is the focal point of the stakes. This makes sense; the school of witchcraft and wizardry is Harry's true home.

Although valuable, this approach doesn't generate the escalation of stakes we're aiming for. To achieve that, you really have to move away from the antagonist's impact on a place, and zoom in on his impact on a specific individual, either someone precious to the hero, or perhaps, the hero himself.

The most traditional variant of this particular escalation tactic is to go from stakes of general protection to stakes of demise. In *DIE HARD 4*, for instance, the stakes initially revolve around the destruction of US infrastructure, and the mayhem such destruction would cause.

However, right before the climax, the story gets personal.

Way, way personal.

If McClane doesn't stop Gabriel, the entire United States won't just be in turmoil. McClane must stop the villain in order to save the life of McClane's only daughter, whom Gabriel has taken captive.

Because this kind of hostage scenario is so frequently used, you may resist implementing this tactic to escalate the stakes. Take careful stock of your reluctance. It may cause more harm than good.

If you don't escalate the stakes, your climax may feel less intense and exciting in comparison not only to the events which precede it but also to all the other climactic sequences in other stories whose scribes weren't so averse to using this tactic.

As a result, you may wind up with an anticlimactic and disappointing ending—

the very thing you were hoping to avoid by eschewing the traditional path!

Honestly, if you've forged a solid audience-hero bond and a strong audience-stake bond, audiences are less likely to make intellectual evaluations in the first place. At the end of DIE HARD 4, how many audience members do you think are asking themselves, "Gosh, how many times have I seen this before?"

And how many of them are wondering instead, "How in the world is McClane going to reach his daughter in time?"

Certainly, although *highly* effective (the italics are there for a reason!), this tactic is not the only option at your disposal.

As an alternative, you could make general stakes feel more personal by overlaying them with stakes of justice. To be more specific, the villain would have to kill someone precious to the hero at the end of Act Two.

Accordingly, the climax wouldn't just be about saving the world, but also about avenging the death of this loved one. This circumstance imbues the climax with an extra degree of intensity which would've been absent if only stakes of general protection had been in play, thereby making the climax feel more momentous than the events which precede it.

Notice that transitioning from stakes of demise into stakes of general protection, doesn't yield the same result as the reverse. Most of the time, this progression will tend to feel anticlimactic.

Here's one way to minimize the likelihood of this unwanted effect: when you introduce the personal stakes at the beginning of your story, foreshadow that general stakes will go into play at a later point.

Alternatively, you can introduce both simultaneously, as in the first DIE HARD. McClane's wife is one hostage (stakes of demise) in a group of hostages (stakes of general protection), all of whom are in jeopardy once Gruber takes control of Nakatomi Plaza.

This arrangement, however, does create a new challenge. In fact, that's why I specifically chose the first DIE HARD and DIE HARD 4 as examples in this section. In DIE HARD 4, McClane's daughter is abducted right before the climax. Hence, in this respect, the third act feels escalated in comparison to

Acts 2A and 2B, when these personal stakes are *not* in play.

In the first DIE HARD, because the stakes start out so personal to begin with, it's impossible to escalate them by making them more personal.

What could you do right before the climax?

Make McClane's kids hostages too? This would be tricky to credibly orchestrate. Not only that, the story would veer into melodramatic territory.

Do you see the problem?

Launching with highly personal stakes creates a gripping story—initially, at least. But when it comes time for the climax, you'll run into a snag. It's unlikely to feel escalated in comparison to Acts 2A and 2B, and accordingly, can fail to make the grade.

To remedy this, you have to resort to the other methods, like tossing in a ticking clock, or by employing other elements of escalation such as scope and duration. (More details on these, later.)

As another option, you can, as DIE HARD did, *go from the general to the personal when you take the stakes out of play.*

In other words, you do NOT take the personal stakes out of play at the same time as the general stakes. In DIE HARD, all the Nakatomi employees besides Holly are taken out of harm's way *first*. Unhappily for McClane, she is still in danger.

Remember, audiences care more about the stakes which directly affect McClane. Thus, they're going to experience a more intense emotional response witnessing the rescue of his wife than the rescue of the other hostages.

Consequently, this uptick in intensity makes the latter half of the climax feel escalated with respect to the first half, even though the stakes didn't escalate immediately prior to the climax itself.

Note: the climaxes of IN THE LINE OF FIRE and SPEED follow a similar model, (although they do involve other nuances which we're not going to get

into here).

Tighten Up the Time Frame

If your protagonist begins his journey under a deadline, as a basic rule, your story will be more focused—a major plus.

At the climax, however, it's time to go beyond a deadline, and into the territory of a ticking clock. Whereas your hero may've had two weeks or 96 hours to accomplish his goal earlier on, now he's down to minutes, or mere seconds.

By increasing the urgency this way, you amplify the tension.

Considerably.

Correspondingly, the stakes feel higher (and the climax more intense) even though technically, the stakes haven't changed. And if the stakes *have* changed, perhaps having gone from general to personal (as in the examples above), then a ticking clock will only heighten the pre-existing level of escalation.

Simple and surefire, it's a win-win and completely free of drawbacks—unless you're writing a romance. In this genre, the ticking clock can cause trouble, not because it's problematical in and of itself, but because it's associated with a major cliché.

I'm talking about the race to the airport, of course.

It's gotten a bad rap. Justifiably so.

But, as I wrote in *Story Stakes*, in your haste to avoid this cliché, don't throw out the baby with the bathwater.

If you eliminate the race component altogether, then your climax will lack tension and energy. Instead of a cliché, you'll get a whopping dose of anticlimax, which is just as bad—if not more so.

A better option is to keep the race, or the urgency, while tweaking the airport component, so it comes across as less of a cliché.

Below is a step-by-step approach which, hopefully, will help you accomplish

just that.

Incidentally, even if you're not writing a romance, you should still take a look at these suggestions. They can help you develop a systematic, replicable method to overcome the clichés associated with *your* genre (like, for instance, car chases).

A Simple Step-by-Step Approach to Tackle the “Race to the Airport” Cliché

As a springboard, let's first look at the individual components of the “race to the airport” sequence which make it a cliché.

In no particular order: an (1) adult, often the hero, (2) races to (3) a metropolitan (4) airport, in a (5) car—which (6) he is driving—in order to (7) make a declaration of love to the heroine.

By my count, that's seven components altogether. The more you tinker around with each of these components, the less likely your climactic sequence will travel down clichéd avenues. (Although, it must be acknowledged, some tweaks will require significant more effort on your part than others.)

Take a look:

(1) The characters doing the chasing are adults

In the standard cliché, the hero and heroine are both adults. Make them children—as with the stepson of Liam Neeson's character in LOVE ACTUALLY—and you've got something slightly more unique.

If no children are involved in your story at all, to implement this solution, you'd have to rebuild your draft, page by page. The effort you expend probably won't be worth it.

On the other hand, if a child is already part of your story, this tweak will just require a change in attitude.

So why not brainstorm possibilities and see what happens?

(2) The hero's pace is fast

If your hero is stuck with the slowest transportation in the world, or if he has to make a lot of unwanted stops, then your climactic race is unlikely to feel clichéd.

Good examples to study include the motorboat sequence in Central Park in *DATE NIGHT* and the race back to the Byrnes family home in *MEET THE PARENTS*.

If you plan to make use of this tweak, be careful. You don't want to slow down the pace so much that all the urgency seeps out of the climax. This will defeat the purpose of including a ticking clock in the first place!

(3) The airport is a large, metropolitan one

Choose another kind of airport, and you play against type.

In *THE PROPOSAL*, for instance, Andrew flies to an airport so small, he's friends with the air traffic controller. That's unusual, to say the least.

Other variations in this vein include:

- changing the airport into an airstrip at a remote location
- changing a commercial airplane into a luxury private jet or a floatplane outfitted with pontoons
- changing the airport into a helipad, and the plane into a helicopter (tourist, air ambulance, etc)
- keeping both the plane and airport commercial, but taking the climax directly to the tarmac (as in *LIAR LIAR*)

Despite these alterations, nevertheless, for a bulk of them, the cliché-factor remains. An airport is still an airport.

Hence, this solution is most effective when coupled with other modifications—and even then, it's a close call as to whether your climax will delight or disappoint.

You're much better off going all the way, by tweaking component #4:

(4) The hero's destination is the airport

As wedding planners are well-aware, venue is everything.

Make your climax a race to somewhere else—anywhere else—and you avoid the cliché altogether.

For instance, in *NOTTING HILL*, screenwriter Richard Curtis had originally planned for Will to race to the airport in order to win back Anna. Fortunately, producer Duncan Kenworthy convinced Curtis otherwise.

In the end, Will races to the Savoy, where Anna is holding one final press conference prior to her departure. Since she's about to leave the country, the urgency remains. Yet, because Will's destination is the site of the press conference, and not Heathrow Airport, the cliché disappears.

NOTTING HILL is a great example of mining the setting of your story to come up with a plausible substitute for the airport. If you're struggling to brainstorm an alternate location to the airport, take a closer look at the special world which your protagonists inhabit.

Pay special attention to their hobbies (Allegra's yacht in *HITCH*), their rituals (the Darcys' ruby wedding anniversary celebration in *BRIDGET JONES'S DIARY*), or professional obligations (the baseball game at the heart of Josie's newspaper scoop in *NEVER BEEN KISSED*).

And if all else fails, you can always bring it back home (*AS GOOD AS IT GETS*, *JERRY MAGUIRE*, *THE HOLIDAY*, and *PRETTY WOMAN*) or use a different transportation hub than the airport (train station, bus terminal, port authority, rental truck depot).

Probably the simplest and most effective tweak of all, it's a wonder that changing the venue is an option regularly overlooked by screenwriters and novelists. (Perhaps due to laziness? A fear that it's too easy, and therefore useless?)

Don't fall into these traps; this tweak is too powerful to ignore.

That being said, if you want to eclipse the competition, after changing the climax's venue, you shouldn't rest on your laurels—especially if you've chosen to end your race at a home or apartment.

Although not as clichéd as the airport, these locations are not particularly exciting. To maintain the feeling of escalation, you must add fresh and unique grace notes to your grand finale.

For instance, JERRY MAGUIRE's heartfelt speech to Dorothy would've felt less intense if it hadn't been witnessed by the divorced women's group. That was a stroke of genius.

It also raises a good point: the ticking clock in MAGUIRE is actually artificially imposed. Does Jerry really have to race to Dorothy's home that evening? It's not like she's going to disappear or take up with a new man that very night...or even the day after.

This is probably the major reason why the airport is the go-to choice for the climactic race's endpoint. In most cases, it creates a *real* ticking clock, not an artificial one. If the hero doesn't speak to the heroine before she departs, it's going to be virtually impossible to find her at her new residence, and he'll lose her forever.

When you make a change in venue, your ticking clock may come across as artificial. This doesn't seem to bother audiences. They certainly didn't mind in MAGUIRE. All the same, this may bother you (especially if you're a perfectionist).

In that case, to change the venue and avoid an artificial ticking clock, you have to come up with a different (time-based) catastrophe other than the threat of permanent geographical separation.

As an obvious example, your hero could race to the altar to stop the heroine from marrying another man. This, however, is not much of a solution since it replaces one cliché with another.

Here's a more creative option: if your hero doesn't speak to the heroine before she arrives at a cloister, she'll become a nun. That would create a natural ticking clock for sure! (Although, admittedly, it would require quite the backstory in a screenplay or novel set in the modern-day world.)

If your story is set in contemporaneous times, the following examples may provide better fodder for your creative muse. In the first SEX AND THE CITY film, Carrie races to the luxurious apartment she was supposed to share with

Big, before its locks are changed.

Her goal? To salvage a pair of never-been-worn, five-hundred dollar shoes. Of course, when she arrives, in addition to those coveted high heels, she also finds her hero. Playing around with the idea of closing escrow could lead you to something similar.

In *ABOUT A BOY*, Will has to race to Marcus's school before Marcus takes the stage and commits "social suicide." You might be able to adapt the conceit from this comedy for the climax in your romance.

If your hero doesn't reach the heroine in time, how might she disgrace or embarrass herself?

And then, finally, consider the approach *NOTTING HILL* took. Remember, Anna was still planning to go to the airport. But before she could depart, she had to take care of the press conference first.

What vital task must your heroine engage in, what crucial obligation must she fulfill *before* she makes her way to the airport? Set your climax at that location, and you maintain the urgency while avoiding the cliché.

(5) The hero arrives at his destination in an ordinary car

Modify your hero's mode of transportation, and your cliché will feel less stereotypical.

You can start with the basic car, and then make it more stylish (like the gold Cadillac Connor appropriates in *GHOSTS OF GIRLFRIENDS PAST*), more unconventional (a black and white police cruiser would certainly not be expected), or hilariously small (the yellow Vespa microcar in *WHEN IN ROME*).

As a side note, some of the best gags in *THE HANGOVER* were created through careful selection of the protagonists' mode of transportation!

Alternately, you could change the vehicle type altogether. Your hero (or heroine) could race to his (or her) destination—airport or otherwise—in a:

- sailboat
- motorboat
- motorcycle
- racing bicycle
- horse-drawn carriage
- food truck
- U-Haul rental truck
- bakery van (This was done in MY BEST FRIEND'S WEDDING to excellent effect.)

(6) The hero is the driver

Let someone else helm the wheel (and cram other passengers in the vehicle). This not only reduces the cliché-factor, it also is a great opportunity to allocate shiny moments to other characters.

You might be worried that by making the hero a passenger, rather than the driver, he'll come across as passive. That's a fair concern.

But, your hero still has to make the speech which wins back the heroine at the end. This will go a long way towards restoring the active-passive balance.

If you continue to harbor concerns about it, you can always follow BRIDGET JONES's lead. She, quite memorably, takes control of the wheel in the middle of the race to the Darcys' ruby wedding anniversary celebration.

This not only gains her extra points to add to her proactive scorecard, but also augments the climax with an extra dose of humor, helping to fulfill genre requirements.

Double-win!

(7) The hero's goal is to declare his love

Basically, there are two main ways to turn this aspect of the "race to the airport" cliché on its head. In the first, your hero will be stymied.

That is, he goes to the airport with the express intention to win back the heroine, only he is deprived of the opportunity. Her flight already took off; he never made it past airport security.

Hence, he'll eventually make his declaration of love in a less clichéd location—the heroine's arrival destination, perhaps. (As long as it's feasible to find her there.)

The advantage here is that you've filled the initial part of the climax with urgency, so the remaining part, in the non-airport locale, can unfold a bit more leisurely, if necessary.

In the second option, the race could still involve the airport. But, to reduce the cliché, you change the tenor of your hero's intentions. He's not racing there to make a heartfelt declaration of love to the heroine. He has a different objective altogether.

My favorite example of this is from *GHOSTS OF GIRLFRIENDS PAST*. Whatever else the film's flaws, the climactic race at the end doesn't come across as a total rom-com cliché. This is partly due to Connor's unique choice of vehicle, as mentioned earlier.

It's also due in part to another cliché-modification. Connor isn't engaged in the race to win back the affection of his amorous opponent. Rather, he races after his brother's fiancée in order to convince her to change her mind, and not call off the wedding.

You can see the same idea in *MEET THE PARENTS*. (I know. It's not a romance, but the principle still applies.) While the climax takes place within the airport, because it involves the reconciliation between the hero and the heroine's father, the sequence feels less clichéd than it would have if it had been used to reunite the hero with the heroine.

In *PARENTS*, the heroine desperately wants her father to approve of her significant other. Thinking along these lines could help you adapt this concept for your romance.

What object would your heroine be overjoyed to possess? Which person would she be overjoyed to see?

At the climax, as proof of his love, your hero could race around the city, country, or globe to find this special object or person and bring it back to her.

In sum, the more components of the standard "race to the airport" cliché that

you modify, the less your climax will appear like it was mass-manufactured on a rom-com assembly line.

While tweaking the cliché is an excellent first step, to stand out in a crowded marketplace, don't stop there. Consider exploring other elements of escalation, such as contrast, scope, and duration.

We'll examine these elements next!

Escalation Element #2: Contrast

By emphasizing a specific divergence between the climax and previous aspects of your story, you can also make the climax feel more special and momentous in comparison.

Simple, but *subtle* too.

It's unwise to rely on this element alone to give your climax an aura of escalation. For best effect, use it in conjunction with the other elements discussed in this chapter.

For now, though, we're going to focus on contrast, starting with how to generate it through...

Costumes, Uniforms, and Figures of Authority

To easily create a sense of contrast at the climax, clothe your protagonists in garments which audiences haven't seen them wearing before.

Keep in mind, though, that this tactic works best when the items of clothing themselves feel special, oftentimes because they are associated with an affair filled with pomp and circumstance.

The dance costumes in the final performances which end *STEP UP*, *SILVER LININGS PLAYBOOK*, and *LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE* are good examples. Prom dresses and wedding gowns can be used similarly in stories whose grand finales culminate in these particular special occasions.

Military uniforms work as well. In *THE GENERAL'S DAUGHTER*, Paul is usually seen in a rumpled suit. But not at the climax.

Here, he's in his dress uniform. In the director's commentary, Simon West explains his rationale behind this choice:

"He's finally become the honorable soldier. Instead of playing the fool and the disheveled rogue, he's coming up against high-ranking officers, and he feels as if he's as good as them—actually better. This is why I decided he should wear his dress uniform, with all of its military decorations."

A word of caution: the desired effect is much easier to achieve in a film, where the visual contrast of the costume or uniform will be readily apparent. Unless you're extremely adept at describing clothing, using this tactic in a novel might not produce a strong sense of contrast at all.

Both screenwriters and novelists, however, can take advantage of the following tip: save the metaphorical big guns for the climax. That is, have your protagonist deal with the biggest guy in the food chain, the one with the greatest stature, at the climax—*but not before*.

In doing so, you send a message to audiences: obviously, they've reached the most important part of the story because the most important people are finally on-site.

In *A FEW GOOD MEN*, although Kaffee does indeed interact with Jessep before the trial, Jessep only makes his courtroom appearance at the climax. Since Jessep is the senior-most military figure to testify, the climax, in part, feels weightier than the previous courtroom scenes from the second act, when figures of lesser authority took the stand.

Note the use of Jessep's uniform here too. This is the first time audiences have seen him in his class "A" dress uniform. Earlier on, he was shown in either utilities or his service uniform.

Besides injecting more pomp into the climax, the use of Jessep's class "A" uniform has another advantage. Through clever dialogue, it helps Kaffee cast a cloud of suspicion over Jessep's word, and thus, establish the defendants' innocence.

Likewise, in the comedy *9 TO 5*, the tail end of the climax feels a tad weightier than what comes before it due to Tinsworthy's arrival. Merely alluded to earlier, the chairman of the board is observed, in the flesh, for the first time.

Even though Tinsworthy's presence tints the climax with a hint of escalation, in this case, this benefit came at a cost. By extricating the heroines from their difficulty, Tinsworthy renders them passive, a flaw which was, as previously discussed, compensated for by other mitigating factors.

Additionally, when, for the purposes of escalation, you save the biggest figure of authority for the climax, your second act will likely lack the kind of hero-

antagonist clashes which audiences relish. Due to its structure, A FEW GOOD MEN manages to circumvent this pitfall, but most stories will not. It's up to you to decide if the tradeoff is worth it.

Character Arcs, Attitude Shifts, and Payoffs

On the surface, August 3rd might not seem like a special day.

Especially not when compared to more eminent occasions like Christmas, your birthday, or graduation.

But if you have a history of timidity, and that's the day you finally tell a pushy colleague to stop pawning his work onto you, well...August 3rd isn't so mundane anymore, now is it?

No one else may celebrate it, but you will.

It's a key turning point in your life, one which feels momentous because it marks a departure from your ordinary behavior.

Same goes for your protagonists.

When they exhibit visible signs of change at the climax, due to the contrast with their prior behavior, the end of your story will feel special, or escalated, in comparison to earlier story events.

A lot of times, the arc of a protagonist from passive to active will accomplish this. We've already covered a few examples: the hero of COLLATERAL, Jake in TRAINING DAY (the definitive action issue notwithstanding), and, to a lesser extent, Farrell in DIE HARD 4.

Of course, other traits can be used to demonstrate your protagonist's arc too. Look at Will in ABOUT A BOY. Initially, he's so shallow, selfish, and skeezy that he pretends to have a child (Ned, age two, blue eyes, sandy-colored hair) so he can manipulate single mothers into dating him.

During the first part of the climax, however, Will demonstrates his transformation into a more sensitive human being by returning to his former hunting grounds, the meeting place for a group of single parents. But this time, Will has a different agenda. He's not there to pick up women. (As a matter of

fact, he comes clean about the fictitious Ned.)

He's attending the meeting to prevent Marcus's mother from committing suicide. Actually, he converses with her so honestly that his forthrightness unnerves *her* (which speaks volumes).

The contrast between his current intentions and his previous ones imbues this part of the climax with a special quality absent from previous scenes. (Although we're skipping over the details, the latter half of the climax, incidentally, also feels weightier due to the power of contrast.)

To be clear, the degree of change doesn't matter. Minor or major, as long as it's clearly communicated to audiences, you're golden.

At the climax of MEET THE PARENTS, Greg—finally—gains the upper hand and interrogates Jack, who appears at a disadvantage for the first time in the film. While it's a stretch to say these two have “arced,” their power dynamic has definitely shifted, with Jack seeking Greg's approval instead of just the other way around.

Despite being less humorous than previous gags, the contrast between this exchange and Greg and Jack's previous interactions makes the climax feel more momentous than it otherwise would have. (*Note: this comment about the humor is important; we'll return to it in a bit.*)

One last example, this time from a romantic comedy. From Amanda's first introduction in THE HOLIDAY, audiences know that she cannot cry. Later on, this setup will be reinforced when she admits this quirk to Graham, who, proving they're well-matched, responds by confessing he's a “major weeper.”

Finally, at the climax, Amanda—drumroll please!—cries real tears.

Their sudden appearance prompts her to race back to Graham's arms (in high heels and on snowy ground, no less). Although the change is slight (and rather predictable), enthusiasts of the genre will appreciate how, by virtue of contrast, the payoff adds a noticeable degree of pomp to the climax.

Weather, Weaponry, and Roll Call

From this sub-heading, you might've guessed that this section focuses on

creating contrast between battle scenes. As such, it's probably most helpful for writers of fantasy or historical fiction, but writers of other genres can benefit too.

The suggestions herein were primarily conceived by comparing the climactic battle for Pelennor Fields in *THE RETURN OF THE KING* to the climactic battle for Helm's Deep in *THE TWO TOWERS*. (Yes, it's another dose of *LORD OF THE RINGS* examples, but they're so good, I couldn't pass them up!)

You can implement the takeaways in this section in two main ways. You can use them to escalate battle scenes *within* one story. For example, between its midpoint fight sequence and the climax. Or, as our source material, you can use these tips to escalate battle scenes *between* novels or films in a series.

The first contrasting elements we're going to examine are the simplest. What time of day does each battle take place? How does the weather differ during each one?

Helm's Deep takes place at night, in the rain. Pelennor Fields takes place during the day, under a canopy of sunshine. True, these divergences don't, by themselves, generate a strong sense of escalation. But they certainly contribute, augmenting the effect of other differences...such as choice of weaponry.

A climactic battle can feel more escalated than the battles which precede it when it involves new weapons which a) were heretofore absent or b) are advanced versions of weapons deployed earlier.

At Pelennor Fields, audiences are introduced to trebuchets (specialized catapults) and Oliphaunts (tank-like elephantine creatures), both of which hadn't been used at Helm's Deep. These additions implicitly tell audiences, "Hold onto your hats. You're in for something new, something different, something special."

That's not all. Pelennor Fields also distinguishes itself by taking battle tools from Helm's Deep to a whole new level.

Battering rams, for instance, play a key role in both battle sequences. But the battering ram used in Pelennor Fields was significantly enhanced. Larger and more ornate than its predecessor, it could even emit fire. It was so impressive

in fact, it was even christened with a name: Grond.

As another example, in Helm's Deep, grapple hook ladders are used to breach the fortress's walls. In Pelennor Fields, the ladders are much more elaborate, transforming into sizeable portable towers.

Your particular situation will affect the way you implement this escalation technique. If you're writing a standalone novel or screenplay, then you can make sure to introduce a weapon like Grond, for instance, at the climax, rather than at the midpoint or at the trough.

If you're planning a series of novels—a trilogy perhaps—then, hypothetically speaking, you could show trebuchets being constructed in the first book, but not being deployed in battle until the second or third. By virtue of contrast, the battle scenes in books two and three will seem more escalated than the ones in the first installment. That's the goal, at any rate.

If you're writing a sequel, you might not have this luxury. The trebuchets were already used in the first book or movie. Thus, to create escalation via contrast, you'd have to give them some kind of extra functionality—the way Peter Jackson transformed the grapple hook ladders into portable towers.

As long as you're in a position to plan ahead, reverse engineering works too. If you come up with the idea of using portable towers in your first book, to create escalation between books in a series, you may actually want to *downsize* the towers into ladders, and save the towers for the sequels.

Notice, though, that in THE TWO TOWERS the scenes with the ladders are still exciting in their own right, and could capture the imagination. That's important.

You don't want to eliminate or minimize all the “juicy” stuff in your first book. If it fails to make an impression, there won't be an audience to appreciate the forthcoming escalation in the second and third.

Here's another potential source of escalation: varying your tactical strategy. Which division of your army will do the most fighting at the midpoint (or book one)? Which will have greater emphasis at the climax (or books two or three)?

In Helm's Deep, the archers play a key role at the climax, while the cavalry rides in at the last minute. In contrast, in Pelennor Fields, the importance of the archers is minimized, and the cavalry is given the spotlight.

The director's commentary from the special extended DVD edition indicates this was a deliberate choice on Peter Jackson's part. Like him, you should be conscientious about decisions regarding your protagonists' tactical battlefield strategy.

Yet, at the same time, you don't want to achieve escalation at the expense of your battle's general. There has to be a logical reason for him to rely on his archers when it would be more beneficial for him to send the cavalry into the fray.

In THE TWO TOWERS, the horsemen arrive at the end of the battle because they had been banished before it had begun, and had just recently received word that they would be welcomed home with open arms.

In an action movie, you can adapt this technique by thinking in terms of location. For instance, you could create contrast between set pieces by setting one aboveground, and the other below. Alternately, the background of one set piece could be water-based, while the other could take place in the sky.

Finally, take stock of your roster of combatants (both protagonist and antagonist). Clearly, enlarging the size of the armies involved will help create a sense of escalation. Although less obvious, the participation of new characters (not necessarily figures of authority) can achieve a similar effect.

Look at Eowyn. In THE TWO TOWERS, she doesn't participate in the Helm's Deep battle at all. For her own protection, she, along with children and the other women, is sent to the inner caverns.

However, she's determined not to be shunted to the periphery of battle again. Disguised by her armor, she joins her brethren at Pelennor Fields and, like her guardian Theoden, demonstrates true valor.

Escalation Element #3: Scope

Scope—the range of action at the climax—overlaps with other elements of escalation, particularly contrast.

But in this section, we’re primarily going to focus on one specific aspect of scope: the extent to which it fulfills genre requirements.

To satisfy audiences, you need to deliver the genre goods throughout your screenplay or novel. This is especially true at the climax, which is your final opportunity to awe them on a grand scale.

The climax is the time to go big, or go home.

It’s the place for your most massive set piece yet.

In other words, to make your climax feel escalated with respect to the rest of your story, it should be characterized by a *genre-appropriate superlative*, such as:

- funniest
- most romantic
- most thrilling
- biggest action stunt

As long as the stakes are high and audiences remain on board with your hero, your climax can’t be “too big.”

In fact, the real danger is that it’s not big enough.

For instance, you may’ve come up with a killer set piece for the midpoint of your story. (Incidentally, this is an excellent place for a set piece.)

In doing so, you’ve set a high bar for yourself.

If you don’t top it, the scenes and sequences which follow—including the climax—can feel anticlimactic and unsatisfying because they pale in comparison.

Even if you do everything right, (wrap up all loose ends, resolve all the conflicts, assign the protagonist the definitive action, keep the stakes in play till the last possible moment, etc), your climax, unfortunately, can still disappoint.

It's one of those ironic cases where success (at the middle of your story) breeds failure (at its end).

Accepting this truth is easy. Acting upon it, on the other hand, well, that's harder to do. See, this creates the ultimate catch-22.

If your climax doesn't trump the middle of your story, it won't satisfy audiences. By the same token, if the middle of your story isn't interesting enough, no one will stick around to witness the spectacles and set pieces contained within the climax.

So what's a beleaguered writer to do?

A killer premise and a track record provide you with an insurance policy of sorts. Reasonably certain that their patience will be rewarded, audiences can give you the benefit of the doubt.

They may continue on, till the end of your story, even if they haven't been particularly dazzled by its middle. After all, your excellent track record got you on their auto-buy list in the first place, and hence, got them to purchase your latest work.

Of course, if you don't have a proven track record, then you can't bank on this strategy at all.

You must rely only on the quality of the writing of the story which audiences currently hold in their hands.

Bear in mind that thinking big at the climax isn't the real challenge. Most writers are adept at going over the top, pulling out all the stops, of brainstorming ideas with an eye towards grandiosity. (And if they're not initially, they catch on pretty quick.)

The real issue is learning how to think small.

That is, how to make the set pieces from the middle of your story capture

audience imagination, despite being smaller in scope than the set pieces at the climax.

This is not an easy skill to master. Honestly, I think I may've underestimated its difficulty in *Trough of Hell*. Hopefully, with time and experience, you'll develop a talent for it.

Until it becomes second nature to you, try balancing the scope between Acts Two and Three by using one of the methods described below:

1) Save the landmarks for the climax

Setting is always critical to creating dazzling set pieces.

The more intriguing the setting, the more likely the set piece will possess the requisite level of scope to impress your audience. That's why landmarks are a goldmine for screenwriters and novelists.

Just to be sure we're on the same page, [Wikipedia defines a landmark](#) as:

“Anything that is easily recognizable, such as a monument, building, or other structure. In American English it is the main term used to designate places that might be of interest to tourists due to notable physical features or historical significance.”

Basically, a landmark is any structure that's distinctive in some way, whether in size, beauty, age, or significance. This distinctiveness connotes grandiosity, and, by default, tends to enlarge the scope of the events for which the landmark provides the backdrop.

Once you use a landmark as the setting for a set piece, you're going to find it extremely difficult to top, which, remember, can make everything which follows feel anticlimactic in comparison.

Do yourself a favor. Save the landmarks (any super-sized set piece, really) for the climax of your story.

It might interest you to know that in X-MEN: THE LAST STAND, aka X-MEN III, the huge sequence with the Golden Gate Bridge (excellent landmark choice!) initially occurred around the first quarter of the story, instead of at the

climax.

The alteration was made for multiple reasons. For one thing, director Brett Ratner felt the original setting of the climax—Washington D.C.—was too clichéd.

For another, the scale of the bridge sequence was too epic for its early positioning, an observation which was made in not one, but two (!), filmmaker commentaries.

As related in the DVD's writer and director commentary, second unit director and stunt coordinator Simon Crane repeatedly asked, "Why are we blowing everything so early in the movie?"

By relocating the stunts on the Golden Gate Bridge, the filmmakers eliminated a potentially huge source of anticlimax. If you follow their lead, realize that when you shift a landmark's position to the end of your story, you can't leave a void at its beginning or middle. The set piece in the latter locations—minus the landmark—still has to be interesting.

In this respect, X-MEN III delivers. Audiences get to watch Magneto reunite with Mystique and toss police cruisers into the air. Plus, audiences are introduced to two new mutants, Multiple Man and Juggernaut.

Fun!

They also get to see Mystique, as a result of the mutant cure, transformed into a human—and how, in response, Magneto abandons her, even though she had just saved him from the very same fate.

Chilling, not fun, but definitely intriguing.

Now, you might be saying to yourself, "It was easy for the X-MEN III guys. They were dealing with mutants and DNA-altering drugs!" True enough.

Even if your story lacks fantasy elements, you can learn from this example. Whether a police convoy (the film version) or San Francisco's landmark bridge (the version in early screenplay drafts) was under attack, the overall conceit of the sequence remained the same: it always revolved around a prison break. The filmmakers just retooled the original concept by reducing its scale.

If you need to fill the void caused by repositioning a set piece, take a cue from X-MEN III. First, identify the essence of the sequence.

In generic terms, what is it about?

Then, brainstorm ways to express this generic idea in a way that's exciting, but which doesn't undercut your climax.

Recall that Ratner objected to using Washington D.C. as a backdrop for X-MEN III's climax because this setting is overused. Ideally, when selecting your landmarks, you should aim for one which hasn't been used before. There are plenty of other landmarks besides the Eiffel Tower, you know!

If your heart is set on the Eiffel Tower, or another frequently used landmark, then at least try to use it in a different way. It doesn't appear the way audiences are accustomed to seeing it, for instance, since it's under repair or being illuminated by fireworks.

Oh, and by the way, it's not imperative to use a landmark at the climax to make it exciting. As I recall, TAKEN doesn't—the focus is on Bryan's very “special set of skills”—and it did fine, thank you very much.

2) Put the scope under a shrink-ray

Basically, if you come up with something really awesome for the middle of your story, instead of moving it to the climax (as with scope-balancer #1), you keep it where it is and tone down its scope.

With each of your storytelling decisions, you convey to audiences that this Act Two stunt isn't *that* dramatic.

Not by a long shot.

Thus, when the climax finally arrives, audiences are unlikely to conclude that it pales in comparison.

Returning to our Golden Gate Bridge example from X-MEN III, if the shrink-ray method had been used, the Bridge sequence would've remained in its original position. Nevertheless, it wouldn't have been particularly extensive or exciting, incurring minimal damage. (Notice that this tactic is similar to, but

not the same as, replacing the Bridge sequence with a less intense alternative like the destruction of the police convoy.)

As a more concrete, and less hypothetical, example, look at NATIONAL TREASURE 2: BOOK OF SECRETS. Right before the end of the second act, Ben Gates kidnaps the president.

In terms of scope, this is huge.

Or, more accurately, it has the potential to be.

But, on the whole, the enormity of what Ben is doing is downplayed. As presented to audiences, it's not that risky.

He doesn't have to fight a bevy of Secret Service agents to get to the president. They never once train a gun on Ben; no weapons are ever fired. No weapons, as I recall, are even seen.

The scope of the stunt was toned down. Way, way down.

It has the *sound* of a set piece, but it doesn't really have the *feel* of one.

In theory, kidnapping the president should've eclipsed the climax entirely. (I'd argue this actually happened in the first TREASURE film. Nothing at the climax was as exciting as Ben's attempt to steal the Declaration of Independence at the story's middle.)

But because the threat of danger remains low, here in NATIONAL TREASURE 2, the scope of the action stays small. In fact, the climactic action with the architectural surprises underneath Mount Rushmore seems ten times more dangerous than the Secret Service agents Ben encounters during the kidnapping sequence.

In sum, the climax doesn't disappoint, the way it might've, if the kidnapping stunt had been more epic in scale.

Frankly, this scope-balancer isn't one of my favorites. If you tone down an Act Two set piece too much, you can wind up with a huge pocket of anticlimax there, instead of during Act Three.

This tactic was successful in NATIONAL TREASURE 2 partly because of the genre (family action-adventure), but mostly because of the performances of the two actors playing Ben and the president (Nic Cage and Bruce Greenwood, respectively).

In other circumstances, audiences could've felt underwhelmed and incredulous—a guy tries to kidnap the president and there's not a smidgen of fisticuffs or gunfire?!—rather than entertained.

Nonetheless, I kept this scope-balancer on the list because it may help you in a pinch—like when a massive rewrite, for whatever reason, is just not in the cards.

3) Exaggerate reality

Stories can't present real life, as is.

Even when they're based on true events, they can't. It's impossible.

To entertain audiences while keeping to an acceptable page length, screenplays and novels must, perforce, exaggerate reality (to a degree which varies according to genre).

Keep in mind that credibility and realism are *not* the same thing.

The events of your plot have to be credible within the world of your story. Nevertheless, within that world, the rules can be looser than those which govern real life.

In terms of scope, this means that the climax is the place for the theatrical and the absurd. It's the time (as long as stakes are still in play) for spectacle to manifest itself at a level which matches or exceeds previous scenes.

Filled with coincidence, story premises begin with an element of fantasy right out of the gate. How often in real life would a widower run for president—win—and then pursue a romance with a lobbyist on the eve of his re-election campaign, as in THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT?

If you take this truth to its logical conclusion, you can see why the ending of your story is not the place to go cold-turkey and abandon the fantastical. If

your climax matches real life too closely, if it's completely devoid of exaggeration, it won't quite fit the rest of your story. As an unintended side effect, it will feel anticlimactic in comparison.

Simply put: a climax which could be taken straight from the pages of real life is bound to disappoint.

Audiences didn't fork over their cash to experience that.

They don't want to witness life; they want to witness something *larger* than life.

They want to see life on steroids.

That's not to say it has to be impossible for your story climax to unfold in the real world the way it does in your screenplay or novel. But for that to happen, a thousand stars would have to be in perfect alignment.

Okay, so maybe not a thousand stars (that was an exaggeration on my part), but you get the picture.

Rom-com screenwriters and romance novelists have to be especially vigilant about this. Some have the tendency to go ultra-realistic at the climax, perhaps because this is when the hero and heroine are supposed to be at their most honest and authentic.

Jane's speech to Adam at the end of *IT'S COMPLICATED* is one such example. It's a private conversation between two sensible people, gun-shy about getting hurt again.

It's the kind of exchange which, almost word for word, could happen in real life.

It is, not to put too fine a point on it, boring.

It lacks a hint of the absurd—and all the drama and excitement which come along with it.

In contrast, earlier elements (Jane's experience at the plastic surgeon's office, the farce at the hotel where she plans a tryst with her ex-husband, the infamous incident with the laptop, even Jane's super-luxurious home kitchen and Martha

Stewart-esque cornucopia of talents) exist almost on the cusp of fantasy.

Following on the heels of these, the climax douses audiences with a bucket of reality—equally unpleasant and equally unwelcome as being doused by ice-cold water.

Frankly, the climax is a major letdown.

Oddly, although she didn't exercise it at the end of *IT'S COMPLICATED*, writer and director Nancy Meyers usually does exhibit a flair for the theatrical at the climaxes of her romantic comedies.

We've seen this already in *THE HOLIDAY*. In real life, Amanda's tear ducts would be totally functional. And her race through the snow—in heels—would probably incur a serious injury which would put the brakes on her romantic reunion with Graham.

Thankfully, in a movie, things can be—are, in point of fact—different. Amanda's newfound ability to cry and her race back to Graham grace the climax with a welcome bit of spectacle (and, as we discussed earlier, contrast).

You can create spectacle in other ways too, not just through payoffs and urgency. As an obvious choice, the backdrop of the climax can be a spectacle in and of itself, as is the case with Amanda's co-protagonist, Iris.

She eventually gets her leading man in the midst of a ceremony honoring a legendary screenwriter. The grandeur of the occasion imbues their union with a dose of glamour and pomp (while its *raison d'être* enables Meyers to comment on the current state of the film industry).

Another—more subtle—option to generate spectacle is to vary the geographical heights between the hero and the heroine so they are not at eye-level. Traditionally, the heroine would be looking down at the hero, but you can also play against type, and have him looking down at her.

This arrangement should add an extra degree of pageantry to your climax. Furthermore, it should be successful even if its trappings—like the fire escape in *PRETTY WOMAN*—are fairly mundane.

This is because, regardless of environment, this situation taps into the fairy tale

image, residing in our collective unconscious, of a prince coming to the princess's bower to rescue her.

Finally, a simple and reliable method to generate more spectacle at the climax is to surround your hero and/or heroine with observers who, every so often, can also interrupt the lovebirds' reconciliation to provide their own two cents.

Besides making the scene feel larger in scope, the presence of these observers has many added benefits:

- The number of observers is correlated to the hero and/or heroine's potential level of embarrassment, the experience of which atones for the "crime" of rejecting each other earlier on. (To put it another way, the worse the protagonists' transgression, the more observers there should theoretically be.)
- The commentary from the crowd can be a major source of humor, which will help fulfill genre requirements if you're writing a romantic comedy.
- Members of the crowd can also ask questions or express confusion, giving you the opportunity to clarify last-minute points to your audience, but while masking the expository material.
- Through their interruptions and interjections, the observers delay the reconciliation of the hero and heroine, building up anticipation for the moment when it inevitably occurs.

Look at Jamie's plotline from *LOVE ACTUALLY*. Its climax beautifully integrates variance in heights (Aurelia is on the second floor of the restaurant, while Jamie is at ground level) with a crowd of onlookers (Aurelia's father and sister, their neighbors, as well as the restaurant patrons).

Imagine the climax without these two components. Say, for instance, when Jamie first knocks on Aurelia's door, she (rather than her father, as in the film) opens it. Jamie declares his feelings. They kiss and make-up.

Totally in love, she and he are bound to be on cloud nine.

Audiences, on the other hand, are not.

This alternate version of the climax is too close to reality, too mundane for a grand finale. I mean, really. The very same thing could've happened to one of

their next-door neighbors!

Notice that this guideline holds true even if the content of Jamie's speech essentially remains the same. By themselves, romantic and earnest declarations of love, while appealing, aren't as effective.

To craft a climax which truly thrills and delights, you need to marry spectacle with reality.

4) Keep the monster OUT of the house

To understand this tip, you first have to be familiar with the concept of the "monster in the house."

Popularized by screenwriter Blake Snyder, it's convenient shorthand to describe the kind of plot where a monster (supernatural or otherwise) invades a confined space.

If you're writing a story in this vein, and something feels off to you, perhaps the problem is that you've let the monster *into* the house *too soon*.

Entering the house is essentially the worst thing that could happen. It's going to be difficult to escalate beyond that. As a result, everything which follows can potentially feel anticlimactic.

The solution, then, is to delay the timing of the monster's entry till the climax (or perhaps the end of Act Two), and find *other* ways to maintain audience interest and fulfill genre expectations until that critical point.

HOME ALONE is a great example of this. Burglars Harry and Marv, "the monsters," don't invade the McCallister residence until the climax. Till then, audiences are entertained by the burglars' bumbling attempts to break in, comically forestalled by eight-year-old Kevin.

You can see the same principle in play in THE PERFECT STORM. The perfect storm is "the monster"; the *Andrea Gail* is "the house."

Although alluded to earlier on, the eponymous storm doesn't actually hurt the protagonist fishermen until partway through Act 2B. Moreover, the massive ocean waves generated by the storm don't flood the bridge or the areas below

deck (ie, they don't infiltrate the house), until the climax.

To satisfy audiences until then, the film relies on other sources of interest, like:

- a shark attack
- a man overboard
- a rogue wave
- simmering tension between Sully and Murph
- the desperate search for swordfish (the crew for financial gain; the captain, more so, for honor)

Additionally, by referencing turbulent weather beforehand, when the weather on-screen is still picture-perfect, the film creates anticipation for the perfect storm's eventual arrival. That way, audiences wouldn't be bored, even though they hadn't yet become acquainted with the monster.

Going along with this, when the bad weather hits, the film doesn't immediately start with the "perfect" storm. It builds towards it, taking the time to show audiences how various meteorological elements coalesce into this monster.

Plus, the impact of the turbulent weather, and then the perfect storm itself, is first shown on secondary characters—not on the protagonist fishermen. This sequence of events generates a thrilling sense of foreboding, as audiences imagine what will happen when the *Gail*'s captain and crew finally, as their predecessors already had, cross paths with the storm.

These choices aren't exactly intuitive. A perfect storm is heralded by the film's very title. One would expect it to affect the protagonist fishermen earlier than it did, and perhaps, for the ocean water to invade the interior of the *Andrea Gail* sooner.

But by delaying these events, the film maintains a sense of escalation throughout. Correspondingly, the middle doesn't overwhelm the climax, thereby avoiding an anticlimactic ending.

Depending on your story (or, frankly, your skill level), you might not be able to keep the monster out of the house until the climax. Just do the best you can. At the very least, try to delay its entry until the midpoint.

In most cases, if the monster enters the house sooner than that, your story is unlikely to escalate. Unless you have an extraordinary twist up your sleeve, it will feel like everything went “downhill” from there.

5) Go chunky

Sometimes, no matter how much you brainstorm, there’s just no way to get around it.

No matter what you do, you arrive at the same outcome: the stunts from the middle of your story (or other places) are of equal parity to the stunts at the climax.

If this is the case, you’ll have to rely on other elements of escalation—stakes, contrast, and duration—in order to make the climax feel comparatively more special. Here, we’re going to focus specifically on duration (an element, by the way, we’ll discuss in more depth at the end of this chapter).

To balance the scope between the middle and end of your story, at the climax, you’d string, or chunk, together stunts which are equal (maybe even a smidgen smaller) in scale to the set piece sequences which occur earlier on.

When examined in conjunction, the climactic stunts should take up more time than the previous set piece sequences. This has the net effect of making the former, through sheer accumulation, seem grander in comparison to the latter.

Keep in mind that this tactic only works when the scale of each is closely comparable. If the midpoint set piece is a real showstopper, while the climactic stunts are far tamer, then even though it’s longer, the climax is going to feel, to use slang from 10 THINGS I HATE ABOUT YOU, “without.”

Now that you’re more adept at balancing the scope within your screenplay or novel, it’s time to examine some nuances of scope, starting with:

Scope and Skillset

Action stunts which are epic in scope shouldn’t be easy for your hero to execute.

If they were, they wouldn’t be very epic now, would they?

As you may guess, this poses a conundrum when you're writing an action-heavy story (whether it be a "pure" action movie or a hybrid) and your hero begins his journey as a neophyte or innocent naïf.

Sure, this makeup gives him room to grow, to arc. At the same time, however, it may not be credible for him to engage in stunts of great difficulty. This state of affairs has the potential to greatly limit the scope of your climax.

DATE NIGHT is a good case in point. Phil and Claire's dance routine is hilariously absurd, delivering the comedy goods in spades. But the action which follows is lackluster, resulting in a climax which dissatisfies any audience member who values the action in an action comedy (which, I'd argue, is all of them).

The problem lies with the protagonists' starting position. They're an ordinary suburban couple thrown into extraordinary circumstances. They can't, by themselves, engage in an action-packed shootout at the end—and emerge as victors, instead of victims—without straining credibility to the brink.

If you find yourself in the same boat, it's unwise to tone down the scope of your hero's climactic exploits. If you do follow that course of action, you're likely to end up with an ending as anticlimactic as DATE NIGHT's.

A better strategy is to focus on adjusting your hero's skillset by implementing one of the suggestions below:

1) Change your hero's background

If your hero has a background in armed services, law enforcement, or international intelligence—any employment or hobby of this ilk, really—you basically get a free pass.

Unless he's inept, you can expand the scope of your climax without concern.

Audiences will happily suspend their disbelief and accept his climactic feats of daredevilry—even if they'd be more skeptical towards your hero's real life counterpart who engages in similar behavior.

2) Pair your hero with a more skilled protagonist

If you want your hero to face off against a jet—and win—as part of your climactic action set piece, then he can't be a hacker whose experience with military-grade weaponry is limited to video games.

On the other hand, you can pair the hacker with a wiseass cop and have the latter deal with the jet (as *DIE HARD 4* did), and sidestep credibility hurdles with no trouble.

That being said, this solution comes with a problem of its own: it's easy for the distribution of shiny moments to go askew.

The unskilled protagonist can't just lurk in the background. He has to accumulate his fair share of shiny moments, ones which are well-suited to his unique abilities. In an earlier chapter, we discussed how *DIE HARD 4* accomplished this.

Notice that in this particular example, the skilled hero, John McClane, is the central protagonist of the story. If Farrell, the hacker, had been the main character of the piece, it would've been far trickier to divvy up shiny moments while maintaining the credibility of the climactic action stunts.

3) Gift your hero with transferable skills

This technique is a specialized variation of setups and payoffs. Basically, you bless your unskilled protagonist with a set of transferable skills which can be credibly used in a context entirely different from the one in which it was originally presented.

In *COMING TO AMERICA*, because of Prince Akeem's martial arts display at the film's beginning (the setup), it's believable that he could, using just a mop handle, successfully challenge a robber with a gun later on (the payoff).

Note: the mop handle escapade doesn't happen at the climax of the film, but it's the perfect example to give you the gist of the idea.

4) Expand the time frame

In a special behind-the-scenes featurette for *SNOW WHITE AND THE HUNTSMAN*, actress Kristen Stewart implies that the battle between Snow and the evil queen Ravenna could never be epic.

At least, not credibly.

Under the tutelage of the Huntsman, Snow's combat skills have developed considerably. Nevertheless, the two haven't been together long enough for her to reach the level of swordsmanship required for a fight sequence on par with the ones embarked by Jack and Will (PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN franchise) or Robin Hood (PRINCE OF THIEVES version).

In SNOW WHITE, the filmmakers had to craft a dramatic finale without such extended one-on-one combat. They achieved this primarily through the storming of the castle itself and by depicting skirmishes between Snow's allies and Ravenna's supernatural soldiers.

In an alternate reality, the producers could've insisted that Snow's battle with the queen be more elaborate. Extending the time frame of the story could help accomplish this objective.

The more time your protagonist has to train, the more believable it is for him (or her) to develop into a potent warrior.

Like option #2, this one comes with a major drawback. By expanding the time frame, the focus and tension of your story can dissipate.

You'll have to decide if this cost is worth the benefits. If it isn't, you'll have to employ a different method to make your climactic battle feel epic in scope—or risk an anticlimactic ending.

The Curious Case of Comedies

With respect to scope, out of all the genres, the bar is set the lowest in comedies.

For hybrids like action comedies and romantic comedies, I contend that audiences will be more disappointed if you don't "go big" with the action or romance at the climax than if you "go small" with the comedy.

Audiences even seem to be tolerant of small-scale humor in the climaxes of pure, non-hybrid comedies, which can't rely on action or romance to satisfy. To be clear, your climax can't be completely devoid of comedy. Then it will fail, for a different reason (the failure to fulfill genre requirements at all vs the

failure to escalate the humor), but it will still fail.

All the same, the humor doesn't have to be as large in scope, as let's say, the stunts have to be in the climax of an action movie. Assuming that your screenplay has a hilarious set piece or two and has made audiences laugh out loud a few times, there's a good chance audiences will respond to your story with enthusiasm.

Look at *THE HANGOVER*. The climax boils down to a ticking clock and a visual gag about the color of Doug's face. Despite being amusing, the humor here certainly doesn't surpass the sequence at the police station or with Tyson's tiger. Yet, audiences walked away from the comedy full of praise—not complaints.

In most cases, you'll probably have to rely on something else besides scope to generate a sense of escalation at the climax. Perhaps, the source of escalation will, like *THE HANGOVER*, come from a ticking clock (element #1).

More frequently, similar to *MEET THE PARENTS*, it will probably arise from judicious use of contrast (element #2). Indeed, even though they're small in scope, tiny payoffs seeded throughout the climax and resolution of your comedy will go a long way towards engendering audience satisfaction.

In short, if the climax of your comedy isn't a showstopper, as long as you've made audiences laugh earlier on (and satisfactorily tied up all loose ends), this probably won't be a dealbreaker. Unlike other genres, a jaw-dropping grand finale is more of a bonus than a necessity.

By the same token, if your ending does, with respect to the scope of the humor, eclipse that which transpires before it (as in *HOME ALONE*, *MRS DOUBTFIRE*, and *LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE*), you very well might have a major blockbuster on your hands!

The Impact of Choice

In some screenplays and novels, a key part of the climax revolves around the main character making a critical decision. Although more subtle than a prolonged action sequence or comedic farce, nonetheless, this moment feels epic in scope.

That's because this is a choice which the *entire* story has been building towards.

Obviously, the climactic sequence always involves meaningful decisions: some at the most basic of levels (choosing a specific weapon to fight with, in a battle; or a specific phrasing to use to deliver an apology) and ones of greater import which speak to theme, growth, and character arc (a wronged hero choosing to arrest the villain, rather than kill him, for example).

But in this particular brand of story, it's different. This crucial choice is the essence of the plot, the epicenter of the climax.

Think of:

- JUNO (keeping the baby or giving it up for adoption)
- GOOD WILL HUNTING (embracing or rejecting his talent and Skylar's love)
- THE STORY OF US (getting a divorce or staying married)
- SILVER LININGS PLAYBOOK (reuniting with an estranged wife or pursuing a new romantic interest)
- OUT OF SIGHT (arresting the career criminal or letting him go)

Oftentimes, the choice will be set against the backdrop of a performance-style climax: the dance competition in PLAYBOOK, for instance.

This is by no means necessary. However, by infusing the choice with a hint of spectacle, the performance creates a more vivid feeling of escalation.

SIDEBAR: Intra-Climactic Escalation

Thus far, the points in this chapter have focused on making the climax feel escalated with respect to Acts 2A and 2B. Now, it's time to drill down a little deeper and apply the concept of escalation to the climax itself.

While the climax, as a whole, should feel more special than the rest of your story, it should also escalate *within itself*. The tail end of it should feel more momentous than its beginning.

In other words, you want to *end* the climax with a bang, not begin with one.

Going from general to personal stakes within the climax certainly helps to generate a sense of intra-climactic escalation. Saving the biggest stunt or gag in your collection for the second half of the climax works too.

Finally, as we discussed earlier on this writing guide, power and weight are important as well. You must take these factors into account in order to create a sense of escalation within the climax itself.

With rare exception (the aftershock being the most noteworthy), your hero should dispense with the bad guys in ascending order of importance. He must vanquish henchman B, before henchman A; and henchman A before the villain himself.

Likewise, subplots also should be concluded according to order of importance. You need to resolve subplots B and C before subplot A; and subplot A before (or, when they dovetail perfectly, simultaneously with) the main plot.

If you don't follow this hierarchy, then even when stakes remain in play, the latter half of the climax can come across as anticlimactic when compared to its initial half.

Most of the time, this probably won't be a problem. Your instincts will automatically lead you to this result.

Intra-climactic escalation usually becomes an issue *after* you've drafted your grand finale, and realize—with a sinking feeling in your stomach—that you've forgotten to tie up all loose ends.

One henchman is still at large; one subplot has been hastily abandoned.

In this situation, you may be tempted to correct this problem in the most expedient way possible: by tacking the encounter it necessitates onto the end of the climax you've already committed to paper.

But if you do that, you'll violate the principle of intra-climactic escalation—resulting in a heavily anticlimactic grand finale.

The better alternative is to reengineer the ending of your story. As we briefly discussed at the beginning of this book, instead of wrapping up a subplot in excruciating detail after you've dealt with the central story conflict, you could resolve it:

- at the end of the second act (this option is especially helpful if the climax is getting too long and unwieldy)
- during Act Three at any point prior to the definitive action which resolves the main plot
- briefly, after the main plot has been resolved, but in a way which jeopardizes the happiness or well-being of your main character(s), putting stakes into play once more
- by communicating the outcome of the subplot (whether happy or not) through the resolution (with or without showing the climactic steps taken to achieve this outcome)

Note: all of these suggestions apply equally well to conflicts with henchmen. Just substitute subplot with “henchman A,” for instance, and you should be good to go.

With that in mind, it's time to address the last element of escalation: duration. Turn the page to get started!

Escalation Element #4: Duration

Duration sends a message.

Generally speaking, the more time you dedicate to a task, (other factors being equal), the more important it is.

In an office meeting, for example, more time would be spent discussing strategies to increase revenue than on planning a baby shower for the employee who's worked there for less than a year.

Perhaps, I should amend that. In a *well-run* meeting, boosting revenue gets the lion's share of meeting minutes.

Applying this principle to storytelling, the duration of the climactic sequence, then, speaks to its importance.

A long climax infuses your ending with a sense of weight and momentousness, ie escalation. A short climax can feel insubstantial and unsatisfying—and hence anticlimactic—in comparison.

To put it another way, a short climax can make audiences feel shortchanged.

There's a related issue at work here too: to maintain proportion, each part of your story (Act One, Act 2A, Act 2B, and Act Three) should be of roughly equal lengths, like legs on a stool.

That way, the beginning doesn't overwhelm the middle, and the middle doesn't overwhelm the end.

A short climax means a short Act Three. This, in turn, screws with proportion, frequently resulting in a story that feels, like a misshapen stool, wobbly and unbalanced, even if you can't quite articulate why.

To give your climax a sense of escalation and to keep the proportions of your story in balance, you might have to lengthen the climax of your screenplay or novel, while simultaneously maintaining its intensity. To accomplish this, try implementing one (or more) of the 12 suggestions, below.

A brief disclaimer: many of these ideas have been touched on earlier on in this writing guide. I include them now for the sake of comprehensiveness and convenience.

Also, some might extend the climax by a mere smidgen, less than half a page. They're included nonetheless because every little bit counts (especially in a screenplay), and oftentimes, bring additional benefits to the table.

Without further ado, here they are:

1) Maximize the buildup to the final confrontation

When planning the climactic sequence, a lot of writers tend to focus on the final part, the showdown between the protagonist and his true antagonist. With good reason, too. It is, after all, the essence of the climax itself.

But it's a big mistake to focus on it to the exclusion of other components—specifically the buildup to that oh-so-crucial final confrontation.

That's because buildup, among other benefits, represents a prime opportunity to lengthen a climax that's too short.

As a starting point, you can illuminate your protagonist's preparatory steps in greater depth. To turn your climax into a real “nail-biter,” try showcasing *the antagonist's* preparatory steps instead.

All the same, preparation only goes so far. It's even more effective to brainstorm ways to make it extremely difficult for your protagonist to participate in the final showdown itself.

This approach has multiple benefits. If your protagonist invests so much energy just to have the opportunity to square off against his true antagonist in the first place, you're emphasizing once again how important this confrontation is.

Furthermore, this “slow burn” towards the grand finale prolongs the suspense, heightens anticipation, and rebuilds story momentum, which may've dissipated at the end of the second act.

Finally, maximizing buildup is a great way to add more variety to the climax.

Battling directly with the villain, apologizing to an amorous opponent, or telling off a nemesis can only go on for so long before it feels one-note.

In contrast, possible ways to impede or delay this final confrontation are so diverse, they can carry on for much longer without becoming boring.

Think of the climax of *MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE IV*. If you had been lucky enough to come up with a similar idea, you'd probably start your climax at the TV station.

It's a logical choice. Hendricks needs its satellite to launch his nuclear missile, so why not begin there? What follows—the battle inside the station, the hijinks inside the automated parking garage—is gripping, sure to delight audiences.

Certainly, you've made good headway towards crafting a climax which thrills and delights. However, if you expand the buildup leading towards this finale—the way the film did with Brij Nath's party—you'd make your ending even better.

You could go from good to great...and beyond.

Look at the numerous ways the party at Brij Nath's luxurious mansion enhances the story. It not only infuses the climax with a dazzling dose of spectacle and acclimatizes audiences to the relocation to India. In addition, it also increases the quotient of action (incidentally punctuated by humor) and escalates the tension through:

- Brandt's 25-foot jump into (and out of) the computer array
- Jane's skirmish with Brij Nath
- Ethan's race from the mansion to the TV station in his snazzy BMW i8

In terms of intensity, notice that this action is not at the same degree as the action which follows. This is an important point. When you elaborate the buildup of the climax, take care that it doesn't weary audiences out before you actually reach the final showdown.

2) Include a false defeat beat within the climax

At the very end of the climax, include a mini "all is lost" moment, whether

brief (that fleeting second when it seems that Doug is not on the roof in THE HANGOVER) or lengthy (the fairly protracted period when McClane realizes the real bomb is on the villain's boat, and then, along with Zeus, is handcuffed to it in DIE HARD WITH A VENGEANCE).

When brief, its inclusion tends to amplify audience emotion. With the false defeat climactic beat, audience delight in your protagonist's forthcoming victory is likely to crest at a higher peak than without it.

When lengthy, the false defeat helps more with pacing. For instance, it can give audiences respite between two action-heavy sequences.

3) "Daisy chain" climactic sequences together with multiple false defeats

Take tactic #2 a step further. Use the false defeat more than once as a linchpin which connects different components of the climax together. Oftentimes, this will also enable you to change the setting with ease and efficiency.

LETHAL WEAPON is a prime example, employing three false defeats (Riggs and Murtaugh are taken captive; Joshua escapes on the freeway; Joshua almost drowns Riggs in a puddle of water), to create an epically long climax, which, from the protagonists' foray into the desert to the simultaneous gunshots which kill Joshua outside of Murtaugh's home, spans an impressive 27 minutes. (*Note: this time estimation is based on the director's cut.*)

In romances, you can use the false defeat to switch up the object and subject of pursuit, thus not only elongating the climax but also enhancing it through the added variety.

As a generic example, first the hero would pursue the heroine to ask her if they can get back together. She declines (false defeat #1). Sometime thereafter, she realizes she made a mistake. Accordingly, she chases after him.

Stung by her recent rejection, he now declines her request to reconcile (false defeat #2). Later, of course, he'll realize the error of his ways and seek her out once more; this last pursuit will culminate in actual victory.

Just one word of caution: when you use this tactic, make sure each hero-villain clash (in an action movie) or hero-heroine interaction (in a romance) doesn't come across as repetitious. You're aiming for variety and texture, not

redundancy.

4) Take advantage of the great outdoors

Many times, the climactic sequence will involve the protagonist infiltrating a certain location. (As a matter of fact, this is a great opportunity to maximize buildup.)

Once your protagonist infiltrates this particular setting, theoretically, you could end the climax there. But if you want to extend the length of your climactic sequence, consider taking the action back outside. (While ensuring stakes are still in play, of course.)

Look at *FACE / OFF*. The interior of a church provides the setting for a shootout, culminating in a Hong Kong standoff. Exciting stuff. (Ironic too.)

Originally, the climax ended there. However, according to the screenwriters' DVD commentary, for director John Woo, this was not enough. Known for his stylized action sequences, Woo asked the screenwriters to give him something more.

To fulfill his request, Mike Werb and Michael Colleary extended the climax by taking it outside, first confining the action to the church grounds, then gradually expanding past that boundary onto a pier (it was a beachfront church), two motorboats, and docks some distance from the church.

In a variation of this approach, after you infiltrate a setting and take the action outdoors, you can bring the action back inside again, likely at an interior which is different from the first.

In *DIE HARD 4*, the climax begins at a government building (indoors), relocates to the highway (outdoors), and ends at a warehouse (indoors again).

In *HOME ALONE*, the burglars break into the McCallister house (indoors), pursue Kevin in his backyard (outdoors), and eventually apprehend him inside another home in the neighborhood (indoors again).

5) Cut away to the stakes

Periodically cut away to the stakes to remind audiences why the outcome of a

fight or battle matters.

In addition to lengthening the climax (however minutely), this has the added benefit of slowing down the pace so audiences don't get "action fatigue," while, at the same time, maintaining the tension, and hence, their emotional involvement.

6) Cut away to the ticking clock

Periodically remind audiences that the hero only has seconds to spare.

Again, similar to tactic #5, this doesn't just increase the length of the climax. By infusing the climax with urgency, it also heightens the tension, keeping audience involvement at peak levels.

When devising your ticking clock, you don't have to use a literal clock. For instance, rising water levels in *NATIONAL TREASURE 2*, *THE PERFECT STORM*, and *CASINO ROYALE* were used in all three films to indicate the protagonists were running out of time.

7) Split up a group of protagonists and intercut between them

The climax of your story will naturally become longer as you switch back and forth between each sub-group.

That's one major benefit. Here's another: when multiple characters are in the same location, in many cases, they'd all have to engage in the same action. It'd be illogical for them to behave otherwise.

This gets boring.

Fast.

If you split up the group, on the other hand, you can vary their behavior, adding more texture and visual interest to your scenes.

You can also use the protagonists' separation to create a dynamic ticking clock. For instance, can protagonists A and C distract the villain and his henchmen long enough for protagonist B to deactivate a bomb?

Intercutting between protagonists is probably used most frequently in action-heavy movies, where the good guys battle against their enemies across multiple fronts. But you can apply this tactic to less action-oriented stories too, (with perhaps more emphasis on dividing up your protagonists rather than on intercutting between them).

Look at the comedy *LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE*. Dwayne and Frank leave the hotel where Olive's beauty pageant is being hosted. Sheryl is backstage, helping her daughter prepare...leaving Richard to fend for himself in the audience.

Theoretically, everyone—Dwayne, Frank, and Sheryl—could've waited in the audience along with Richard. In this decidedly inferior alternative version, each character would've basically shared the same experience: watching Olive on-stage.

Admittedly, they could each respond to the on-stage activity in different ways. Nevertheless, there's only so much you can do with four characters seated next to each other in a crowded hotel banquet hall.

8) Add more observers to the scene

As discussed earlier in this chapter, multiple observers, or witnesses, come with multiple benefits. Their interruptions won't just help you extend the length of your climactic sequence.

To quickly recap, they also can: make a protagonist's atonement more satisfying, increase the potential for humor, enlarge the scope via absurdity, provide an opportunity to make last-minute clarifications, and build up anticipation for the hero and heroine's inevitable reconciliation.

9) Reposition the subplot climax

Let's say you've resolved a subplot at the end of the second act. Alternately, maybe you haven't even shown the subplot climax on-screen. Instead, you've revealed its outcome to audiences during the resolution.

If you need to extend the length of your climactic sequence, rethink this decision. Rewrite your draft so that the climax of the subplot occurs within the midst of the climax of the main plot.

As an added benefit, if the subplot climax is comparatively subdued, it can slow down the pace, helping to avoid action fatigue.

As an example, study Molly's acceptance of the supernatural in *GHOST*, which is sandwiched in between Sam's fight with the archvillain's henchman and Sam's fight with the archvillain himself.

Note: In terms of function and effect, sandwiching a subplot is similar to tactic #2, the lengthy false defeat.

10) Allocate more shiny moments to supporting characters

If your climax isn't lengthy enough, you can afford to be more generous with the shiny moments. Take the time to focus the spotlight on secondary-level characters.

Actually, this works really well with tactic #1: toss in more obstacles to maximize the buildup, which in turn, provides more opportunities for supporting characters to shine.

Keep in mind that, as always, your hero still needs to be the one who takes the definitive action. Going along with this, supporting characters shouldn't accumulate so many shiny moments that they wind up overshadowing the hero.

11) Add an aftershock to the tail end of your climax

After your hero has achieved his goal, give him—and audiences—a moment to savor his success. Then, in a surprise move, abruptly yank it out of his hands and put his safety or happiness in jeopardy once more.

In *SPEED*, this tactic not only generated escalation via stakes, scope, *and* duration, it also helped orchestrate a direct encounter between the hero and the villain who, heretofore, had only engaged with each other indirectly since the movie's beginning.

12) Paragraph more frequently

When you add more blank space to your text, the same content is going to take up more room.

On the surface, this may seem like a cheap trick to lengthen the climax.

But it's not.

At the climax, the action taking place should feel accelerated, as if it's hurtling towards an imaginary finish line. When you paragraph more frequently, readers are forced to speed up their pace too.

Thus, your writing style matches your content, making for a more enjoyable and satisfying reading experience.

As an example of this tactic on steroids, study Walter Hill's draft of ALIEN.

* * *

After reviewing all of these tips, you might be wondering if it's possible for the climax to get too long.

Indeed, it is.

A climax that's too lengthy can disappoint as much as a climax that's too short, albeit for a different reason. Rather than boring audiences by providing too little, you'd be boring them by providing too much.

It's not necessary for every climax to be as extended as the ones which end the PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN franchise. Since brevity is the soul of wit, in a comedy spec, a protracted climax can be particularly damaging.

Overly-long climaxes can be problematic in other genres and formats too. In FACE / OFF, for instance, according to the screenwriters' commentary, "There was a lot of negotiating with the studio about exactly how long these two [the hero and the villain] were going to beat each other up on the sand before the movie finally ended."

Additionally, in novels as a general rule, and romances in particular, short climactic sequences (and third acts) tend to be par for course, consuming as little as 10% of the overall story. (Although, it should be noted, many of these stories would be vastly more fulfilling if their climaxes were somewhat lengthier.)

If you find yourself in a position where your climactic sequence is too lengthy, you can reverse engineer the tactics listed above to shorten it. Minimize the buildup, decrease the number of interjections made by observers, relocate the subplot climax to another spot, etc.

Just be careful that you don't sacrifice quality and reduce the good stuff for the sake of page count.

That being said, this is usually not the problem. Most writers don't take the climax far enough, either because there's simply not enough "meat" to their concept, or more commonly, because they haven't fully utilized the components already present.

While it's important to orchestrate a direct confrontation between the protagonist and his true antagonist, to have your protagonist take the definitive action, and to keep stakes hanging in the balance at the climax, the inclusion of all of these elements can still add up to a ho-hum experience.

Remember, it's not enough that your ending wraps up all your story threads with one magnificent bow.

The marketplace is littered with stories which do just that.

Serviceable? Sure.

But, memorable? No.

To stand out, you can't just phone it in.

You need to deliver more than that.

You need to thrill and delight.

You need to become a closer.

In point of practice, this means generating a sense of escalation at the climax, not just through length, but also through stakes, contrast, and scope.

Of all the ways to improve the overall quality of the climax, this is the one which probably gets overlooked the most—especially by writers in a rush to

take their screenplay or novel to the marketplace.

Don't make this mistake.

Take the time to figure out how to make your ending feel more special, weighty, and momentous.

Make it worth waiting for...

...and the dreams *you've* been waiting to materialize—more sales, better reviews—are much more likely to come true.

Conclusion: The Writer's Last Stand

Whew! You've survived.

If you're working on the climax of your story, like your protagonist, you've made it through an "all is lost" crisis of your own.

It was a dark time. Plagued by fear and self-doubt, you didn't think your story would ever come together.

Or, even worse, you believed it could come together...if a more skilled writer had been charged with the task.

It seemed impossible to ever reach THE END.

But, the clouds, miraculously, have passed.

And you've emerged all the stronger for your ordeal.

You're returning to your keyboard, with the elixir of confidence in hand, with the knowledge that you *can* do this, with the conviction that you *are* meant to be a writer.

By hook or by crook, nothing—nothing—will stop you from finishing your screenplay or novel.

Yet, your challenges are not over. Like your hero, there's one last crucible to endure. He must engage in his final confrontation with his true antagonist—and you have to craft it.

It can't be any regular old climax either, but one which impresses the most jaded of studio executives, the most finicky of bookworms.

It's your last chance to demonstrate your writer's mettle, to prove you can tell a gripping yarn, to show audiences you know how to entertain them until the last possible second.

Throughout the ages, surviving this ordeal would secure storytellers valuable rewards. Happily, the present-day is no exception.

If you can deliver a climax which thrills and delights, you can enjoy the ultimate dream: a lucrative and fulfilling career which enables you to pay the bills by doing what you love.

It is my sincere hope that the tips in this book will help you, like the writers (and heroes) who've come before you, to achieve a gloriously happy ending of your own.

I wish you much success on your storytelling journey.

Want More?

Need help with the middle of your story?

Prevent the middle of your story from “sagging” with my writing guide, *Trough of Hell*.

In it, you’ll learn how to combine pain, emotion, and paradox into a powerful Act Two ending. Specifically, we’ll cover:

- how to use 4 different pain types to inflict maximum damage to your hero (and why you should)
- 3 methods to make the trough of hell more emotionally intense—without altering a single beat of the “all is lost” moment
- how a hero can seem to be the furthest away from his goal, when you and I both know he’s about to accomplish it in 15 pages (give or take)
- 7 common ways to end Act Two and how to overcome the unique challenges each presents
- how to enchant audiences by combining multiple trough types

Click on the link below to read a free preview on Amazon:

<http://smarturl.it/conquer-act-two>

Would you like to transform readers into raving fans of your screenplay or novel?

With story stakes you can. Easily.

They’re the secret to giving readers a super-intense emotional experience—and that’s what makes them recommend your story to everyone they know.

We’ve covered some basics here in *Story Climax*, but if you want to take your knowledge further—and learn specific strategies to raise the stakes (even when they’re already high to begin with!)—take a look at *Story Stakes*.

Click on the link below to get started:

<http://smarturl.it/story-stakes>

Looking for more story structure tips or feedback on your screenplay?

Please visit my website, Scribe Meets World, to discover more storytelling techniques and tips as well as other writing guides I've authored:

<http://scribemeetsworld.com/>

There, you'll be able to download the Ultimate Story Structure Worksheet.

It will walk you, step by step, through the process of plotting your next screenplay or novel. (It's free, by the way!)

On my website, you can also learn about my script notes service. I can provide you with detailed feedback you can use right away to improve your screenplay, especially its structure.

Reviews are like promotions...

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If this book helped you, would you take a minute to write a brief review on Amazon?

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Merci, fellow scribe. Merci!

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