CHARACTER QUESTIONS

Who is your main character? Why should we be interested in him? What attracts you to him? (Always read: "or her"). How do you make us empathize with him?

Why do you believe we will find him sympathetic? What is the reason exactly?

What makes us curious about him? What is his "mystery"? What is his "magic", his charisma? How does it show?

What does he think of his father? What does he hate and like about them? What influence did his father have on him?

His mother? How does he think of her? What does he hate and like about her? What influence did she in his opinion--have on him?

His brothers,sisters? What does he like about them? Why? What does he despise?

What type of discipline was he subjected to at home? Strict? Lenient?

Was he overprotected, did he feel rejection or affection as a child?

What was the economic status of the family? Any adverse situations?

Divorce, illness, alcoholism, etc.?

What was the religious atmosphere in his family? How does he feel about religion himself?

Is he smart, intelligent, slow witted? Clever?

How did he do in school? What grade did he graduate (or drop out) from? How does he see himself? Smart? Intelligent? Uneducated? How does his education and intelligence reflect in his speech pattern, vocabulary and pronunciation?

Did he like school, his teachers, his schoolmates? What was

he interested and involved in most? What are his political beliefs?

What does he do for a living? How does he see his profession? As a "job"? As a "career"? What does he like about it and what does he dislike?

Did he travel? Where? Why? What did he find abroad and what does he remember?

What were his deepest disillusionments in life?

What were the most deeply impressive political or social - national, or international events that he experienced?

What are his manners like? What is his type of hero? Whom does he hate?

Who are his friends? His love mates? What is his 'type' of the opposite sex, his 'ideal' partner? What does he want from his partner? What does he think and feel about sex?

What social groups and activities does he attend? What role does he like to play? What role does he actually play, usually?

What are his hobbies and interests? What does he do for fun?

What does his home look like? His taste? His dress? His furniture? His hair? Beard, whiskers, (make-up)? How does he relate to his own appearance? How does he dress? Style of it? Quality?

Who is his mate? How does he relate to her? How did he make this choice?

What role does he play at home? What role would he like to play?

Does he have children? How does he feel about his parental role? About the children? His ambitions? How do the children relate to him?

How does he react to stressful situations? Defensively? Aggressively? Evasively?

Does he drink? Take drugs? Does he feel self righteous? Revengeful? Does he always rationalize his errors? How does he accept disasters and failures? Does he like to suffer? Does he like to see other people suffering? Is he manipulative? Does he abdicate responsibility for things?

How is his imagination? Daydreaming a lot? Worried most of the time? Living in memories?

Is he basically negative when he faces new things? Suspicious? Hostile? Scared? Enthusiastic? What does he like to ridicule? What does he find stupid? How is his sense of humor? Is he aware of himself, his weak spots, idiosyncrasies? Is he capable of self irony?

What does he want most? What does he need really badly, compulsively? What is he willing to do, to sacrifice, to obtain what he desires?

How badly does he want to get what he claims as his life objectives? How does he pursue them?

Is he tall? Short? His weight? How does he feel about his size, weight? His posture? His walk? Does he want to project an image of a younger, older, more important person? Does he want to be visible or invisible?

What are his habitual physical gestures? Vigorous? Weak? Controlled? Compulsive? Is he energetic or sluggish?

His voice? Pitch? Strength? Tempo, rhythm of speech? Pronunciation? Accent?

Do you like him? Hate him? Why do you need to write about him? Why should people be excited about him?

FEATURE OVERVIEW: SCRIPT ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

[In general, if you don't know the answers to these questions regarding your own script, something will be missing.]

WHOSE STORY IS IT? Who is the "main character" or "protagonist"? With whom do we really identify? Whose plight or problem do we worry about? They don't have to be a "good guy" but we should have some sympathy for this character. Sympathy comes from creating an interesting character for whom we have some empathy. Is this person compelling? How so? Why are you interested in this character? What is the special problem this character has that you would like to explore?

LIFE DREAM? If this character had a magic wand and could change the world to his/her favor, what would that ideal world be? What does he envision life to be like for himself? This dream may not be explicitly presented in the script, but knowing it can give the writer (and audience) a window into the soul of the character.

LIFE AT ODDS WITH LIFE DREAM? How is the world in which the story takes place making it difficult for the character to reach his ideal? If it's easy for the character, then where's the conflict? An easily achieved life dream doesn't leave room for much of a story. The "world" of the story is a subjective and particular milieu unique to each film, the rules of which are established for the audience early in the script.

WHAT HE/SHE WANTS? What does the character want? Not last week or next year but now within the confines of the story. What is the objective or "goal" the character pursues during the film? Not exactly the same as the life dream; his life dream may be beyond the scope of the story. For example: A character's dream might be to play futbol like PelÉ, but what he wants in the story is to make the university team. Another character may dream of running in the Olympic marathon but what he wants is to get out of his wheelchair and re-gain the use of his legs. This "want" usually leads us to a particular question or "main tension" which will shape the character's pursuit (and audience's experience) in Act Two.

WHAT HE/SHE NEEDS? What does the character need in the world of the story? It can be identical to what he/she wants (if the character wants to survive, the world of the story is one that horrendously threatens that survival and what the character needs is to survive) but the need more often is quite different from the want. The soccer player may want to make the university team but he needs to learn

that he's a capable and worthy human being regardless of his achievements on the field. A man may want to be President of the United States but he needs to maintain his bond with his family. A story in which a character sacrifices his "need" for what he wants, or fails to recognize his need in time, is usually a tragedy.

POLARITY or "ARC" ? How is the protagonist effected psychologically/emotionally by the story? Is he/she changed in any profound or meaningful way? Do the circumstances of the story explore the weaknesses this character has when the story begins? Does the story test the character in any substantial way? Where does the character start in the story and where does he end up? They should usually be at polar extremes from each other, 180 degrees apart. From ignorance to knowledge, from bigotry to compassion, from distrust to trust, from uncertainty to self-confidence, etc. If the character undergoes no change, learns nothing and simply remains constant -- a drama of internal conflict can't really be achieved. A comic character (not a character caught up in a comical situation, but one that on his own is comical) and a comic book character may not change much in a story. A central character in a realistic story generally needs to experience some kind of growth/change for the audience to leave the theater with any feeling of completion.

THEME? In a word. Distilled down to the simplest possible statement, what is the story about? Trust? Responsibility? Self-acceptance? Power? Generosity?, and so on. No matter how convoluted and sophisticated your story, there should be one central element, some focal point which all the story machinations revolve around. How is the theme (or a variation on it) reflected in the main character's plot, as well as in the subplots? Thematic layering adds resonance to the simplest of stories.

MAIN TENSION? What is the main tension that the AUDIENCE FEELS through the story? Stated as a question (Will Jonathan learn to accept his brother's disability? Will Roger Thornhill clear his name before he's killed or arrested?) The main tension implies an "either he will/or either he won't" situation.

HOPE VS. FEAR? What does the audience hope for? Which way do they want the character to go? What does the audience fear? What's the wrong, frightening turn the story could

realistically take? Both outcomes must be possible in order to create a strong main tension.

WHAT'S AT STAKE / RISK? If the story goes this way or that (audience's hope vs. fear) what is the "price" that the character must pay? If there are no consequences to the character's actions (in emotional terms, financial terms, etc.) then why should we care which path the character takes? Generally speaking, the world should be at stake. In a James Bond film it literally is the world that's in jeopardy, but for all stories the outcome of the Main Tension should mean the "world" to the main character, emotionally or otherwise. If the consequences aren't vitally important to the protagonist, why should the audience care?

A CLOCKWORK ORANGE
synopsis in three acts

ALEX is the leader of an extremely violent youth gang in a futuristic England. He lives with his parents in a housing project, rarely attends school, and spends nights looting, raping, administering severe beatings to strangers and engaging in other forms of antisocial behavior with his fellow "droogs". A SOCIAL WORKER suspects Alex and his droogs, giving him warning that he is being monitored.

The gang assaults an old wino, beats up and rapes a writer and his wife. A conflict develops between Alex and the gang, who tire of his imperious leadership. Alex reasserts his position by beating up and slashing his droogs. In the next particularly violent raid, they respond by clubbing him and abandoning him at the crime scene--where he is arrested and charged with murder.

Alex is sent to a prison, where he attempts to gain favor by pretending to reform and acquire a belief in religion. Chances for release seem slim despite his efforts until he learns of a new program for early release by means of a behavior modification experiment. This modification program is supposed to "cure" the most vicious of criminals. Alex volunteers and is selected for the experiment.
Through Pavlovian techniques he is made extremely sensitive to scenes of violence and aggressive sexuality, causing a vomiting reaction when he witnesses these. Coincidentally,

he is similarly sensitized to Ludwig von Beethoven's music, [established in the first act as his only redeeming characteristic]. After a demonstration of the modification technique's success he is released.

Alex returns to his old neighborhood where he then encounters those whom he had harmed previously. Because of the modification technique he is incapable of defending himself. The old Wino, his former droogs (now police officers),and the now crippled writer all get their revenge. The writer is the most ingenious, locking Alex in a room and playing Beethoven until he makes a suicide attempt by jumping out a window. Alex recovers in a hospital, heavily bandaged. The Minister of Justice (who selected him for the experiment) comes to visit him. The two strike a deal, which is consummated by the Minister feeding Alex breakfast. Alex is offered a large financial settlement and told that the Writer will be "put away" forever. Alex agrees to cooperate with the Minister and help save his political skin. In the film's final moments, Alex visualizes himself in a scene of sex and violence--accompanied by Beethoven's music--and rejoices that he is "cured" once again.

DRAMATIC FORM

DRAMATIC FORM:

[Formal elements: Status Quo, Point of Attack (sometimes called "Inciting Incident" or "Element of Chaos"), Problem or Predicament established, Rising Action, Crisis, and Resolution.]

In classical drama there tends to be a "shape" or form to the way character and conflict are established, developed and finally resolved. This shape is more or less as follows:

1/ A character and his/her circumstances are introduced, creating a picture of the "status quo" of the character's life. This is the "undisturbed" life or "routine" of the protagonist.

2/ Something chaotic happens and "attacks", disturbs or disrupts this status quo creating a PROBLEM or PREDICAMENT for the character. The protagonist either chooses, or is forced to deal with this problem. In doing so obstacles will be encountered and a "tension" or question is established regarding the problem: Will the character solve

it or not? This is the character's "objective", "goal" or "want" in the story.

3/ Once the problem is established, the character takes ACTION (or fails to act) and the CONFLICT develops; the action "rises" or intensifies until a CRISIS or moment of intense tension is reached. This crisis results in the RESOLUTION of the problem, (happily or unhappily) and the creation of a new status quo.

And so it continues: Status quo, problem, rising action, crisis, resolution and new status quo. This shape or form is the "DNA" of dramatic construction and can be identified not only in the overall structure of the story, but also in "Acts" within that structure; "sequences" within those acts; and even in "*scenes*" within the sequences. If you want to get crazy about it, you could even take it to a further conclusion and find this form in a character's dialogue or speeches. Understanding the shape of this form and the elements of its construction can help you create more unified dramatic stories.

SEQUENCES and THREE-ACT STRUCTURE

In order to assist in the analysis and writing a film story, it may be helpful to break the structure into "sequences". A sequence is generally a block of screen time, approximately 10 - 15 minutes in length, usually made up of 5 - 7 scenes. A sequence typically has its own "tension" or dramatic question around which it revolves: [Will the groom get to the church on time?; Will the robbery go as planned?; Will the dancer find the courage to show up for her audition?, etc.] and builds to an "event" which climaxes it [dancing fantastically at the audition, missing the wedding, getting killed during the robbery, etc.]

In a film of normal length (roughly two hours) there are generally eight sequences. Two in the First Act, four in the Second Act, and two in the Third.

The history of the sequence concept is interesting partly because it is one of the few aspects of cinema dramaturgy that doesn't date back to Aristotle. The shape of sequences as I described above is unique to cinema because they developed as a result of motion picture technology. In the early 1900's motion pictures were initially contained on one reel. Soon "one-reelers" became a

standard length for a film and the length of a reel of 35mm film ran at approximately 10 - 15 minutes. As filmmakers' ambitions (and the audience's attention span) grew, films became longer: 2 reels, 3 reels, 4 reels and more. Initially however, there was only one projector to show the film on (the camera and the projector often being the same machine in the early days), so the audience had to wait during the pause for the second or third reel to be threaded. In order to make this down time as discontinuous as possible, filmmakers soon began to structure dramatic material within the story so that the action of a reel peaked approximately every 10 - 15 minutes, or right before the reel ran out. The audience grew excited during the developing action, watched the climax and resolution of some dramatic event and then relaxed just as the reel ran out. There would be a short interval as the next reel was threaded up, then the process would begin again: the establishment of the new status quo, rising action, culminating tension, then denouement. And so on … Writers, directors and editors soon absorbed this way of structuring story tension and it became second nature. I have spoken with directors from the 1920's, 30's and 40's about their films and they still discuss them in terms of reels: "The problem was in reel three." they might say.

In the modern era, filmmakers almost instinctively work with this structural shape in mind -- *sequence shape* -- whether they know it or not. Television was to copy this pattern from the cinema and thus the commercial break was born. What is very important to understand, is not that other writers and directors have learned to shape cinema stories in this way, but that the AUDIENCE has learned to access cinematic narrative according to this shape as well. If some dramatic problem doesn't develop and climax within 10 - 15 minutes, even your Grandmother or your young child can tell that something is not working. The audience's expectation of narrative development has become almost instinctive at this point too. Do you have to satisfy their expectations? Can you shake them up? Deny them this satisfaction if you choose? Sure. But it pays to understand their expectations if you want to effectively (and successfully) affect them.

ACT ONE - Overall function: Introduces and sets up the principal characters and their world; establishes the story "problem" for the protagonist.

Sequence One - Establishes the routine or "status quo" of protagonist; the life of the main character before the problem of the film enters and disrupts his or her life. "Routine" in this case doesn't mean that the life of your character is boring or inactive. It could be that the 'routine' of a character is to be on the run from the police as in TRAINSPOTTING; or stranded in a deadly wasteland like THE ROAD WARRIOR, or the hectic life of a working mom with a precocious kid and no husband as in ALICE DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE, etc. Typically, towards the end of this sequence we have the "Point of Attack" or "inciting incident", which will change the character's life by end of Act One. In this event, the 'problem' of the picture is first introduced -- or "attacks" the story for the first time. Another way of looking at it this moment is to see it as the "element of chaos" that interrupts the usual order of the hero's life. It could be the terrorists first appearance in DIE HARD, the news of the friend's death in THE BIG CHILL, William Hurt meeting Kathleen Turner in BODY HEAT, Jake Gittes being served with a subpoena in CHINATOWN, Mrs. Robinson's first attempt to seduce to Benjamin in THE GRADUATE, etc.

Sequence Two - The character and the problem are on a collision course. By the end of Act One the protagonist knows they have a serious problem and must do something about it. Act One usually ends with a strong decision to take on the problem. It is a good idea to find a way to "lock" the character into the story. If they could just walk away, how dramatic and compelling can the problem be? A detective gets assigned a case he does not want or must work with an undesirable partner (Danny Glover and Mel Gibson in LETHAL WEAPON, DEPARDIEU and Pierre Richard in LES COMPERES.); a man out of touch with his past is forced to make a trip home to attend the funeral of his father; a man sets out to exact revenge on someone for killing his brother; Dorothy in THE WIZARD OF OZ must find a way to get back home to Kansas.

ACT TWO - Involves the "development" and intensification of the story as the protagonist struggles with the problem. Efforts and obstacles escalate to the end of the Act Two climax.

Sequence Three - Rising action. The character starts trying to solve their problem or achieve their objective and usually does what seems easiest first. This is a sequence about eliminating the easy alternatives. Need money for the

dance - why not ask dad for it? Or break open the piggy bank. In a murder mystery, the detective interviews the last person who saw the victim alive, etc. By the sequence's end, the protagonist has not accomplished all of what they wanted and it is clear that greater effort will be needed.

Sequence Four - The protagonist tries harder to solve the problem, but is still frustrated and comes up with other, more serious tactics. They make a great effort but still fall short of their goal. In general, the obstacles start getting bigger and bigger, requiring more work from the protagonist. It seems like their new efforts should be enough, but by the sequence's end, the character has still not achieved what he/she wants. A "culmination" or minor climax of the story occurs as a result, usually raising the "stakes" (jeopardy) and sends story into a new, possibly more complicated direction. This is usually the mid-point of film, typically around minute sixty, and is sometimes called the "First Culmination". Jake Gittes interviews Noah Cross in CHINATOWN; Dr. Chilton, the psychiatrist, discovers Starling's ruse in SILENCE OF THE LAMBS and makes his own deal with Lechter; Baxter discovers Miss Kublick's attempted suicide in THE APARTMENT.

Sequence Five - Sometimes called the "romance" sequence. The protagonist has tried hard to solve the problem but has been unsuccessful. They need to regroup. This "down time" gives the audience a break from non-stop pursuit. This is the moment in movies where the protagonist and the love interest often come closer together, share information about their pasts, etc., and solidify their attraction. In this sequence the character must discover a new way to accomplish their goal. By the sequence's end they usually come up with a new plan. The protagonist is sometimes re-inspired here and carries that inspiration into the next sequence with them. In SILENCE OF THE LAMBS, Starling has her final interview with Lechter and he gives her the case file that he's been working on; in CHINATOWN, Jake discovers the old people in the Rest Home and thus, the conspiracy.

Sequence Six - the final, escalating sequence of the Second Act. Sometimes called the "Second Culmination". The protagonist takes the new tactic or plan they came up with at end of the last sequence and makes the most ambitious attempt yet. Surely this will work. In a robbery film, this is the last bit of preparation until we put the caper

in motion. Same with an "escape" film. In a love story, the characters have fallen in love, and may be ready to admit their attraction, kiss and make up, or even commit to one another. By sequence's end however, something happens to screw it all up.

In a movie with a happy resolution, the end of this sequence is usually a downer, a low point. The character has tried everything they can think of to escape or kill the monster but the damn thing just won't die. In a love story, the girl finds out that the boy slept with her sister and never wants to see him again. The horse we've entered into the Kentucky Derby breaks down and may not even be able to walk.

Contrarily, in a tragedy - the end of this sequence is usually triumphant, or high. It looks like Jake will be able to catch the killer and save Eve in CHINATOWN; the Allied prisoners will escape in THE GREAT ESCAPE; the crooks will get away with the money in THE ASPHALT JUNGLE.

ACT THREE - The resolution of the story. This act usually has a slightly different dramatic tension than Act Two. In Act Two - the question might be: "Can we discover who killed X?" By end of Act Two, the detective may know. The tension of Act Three would then be "Now can he catch him?" In a robbery film the question of Act Two might be "Can we get the money out of the bank?" The Act Three tension then becomes "Can we escape with it, etc.?"

Sequence Seven - "the false resolution". This is the way we think the movie will end based on what we just saw happen at the end of Act Two. In a tragedy like CHINATOWN, Jake plans to spirit Mrs. Mulwray and her daughter/sister away to safety and send Noah Cross to jail; Hamlet will get revenge on Claudius and live; It looks like Oedipus will find the killer of the late King and punish him; In REMAINS OF THE DAY, Stevens decides to reunite with Miss Kenton, and bring her back to Darlington Hall.

In a happy ending, it looks bad for the hero in this sequence. The two lovers will never be together. In IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT, she's going to marry someone else and he's going back to his old bachelor life. In NATIONAL VELVET, they can't find a jockey to ride the horse in the race. In RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK it looks as if the Nazis will get the treasure inside the Ark and Indiana (tied to a stake) will be killed. Usually this sequence ends with a **"twist"** or unexpected occurrence that sends story into the "true" resolution.

In RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK, the twist occurs when strange things emerge from the Ark and destroy the evil-doers. In CASABLANCA, Captain Renaud has a change of heart and hides the fact that Rick killed Major Strasser. In Truffaut's THE FOUR HUNDRED BLOWS, Anton uses the football game as a means to escape the reform school; in PSYCHO, it turns out that there is no Mrs. Bates. Instead, her son Norman is a psychotic cross-dressing killer.

Sequence Eight - This is the "true resolution" or how the movie really ends. The twist sends us to the final ending -- happy, sad or bittersweet. In PSYCHO, Norman goes to the sanitarium where he "wouldn't hurt a fly". In VERTIGO, Jimmy Stewart overcomes his fear of heights and accidentally forces his deceitful ladylove to fall from the tower. In THE GRADUATE, Benjamin crashes Elaine's wedding and the two of them run off together. In BUTCH CASSIDY & THE SUNDANCE KID, the two outlaws get cornered by an entire army and shot to death.

This sequence outline reflects **general** story patterns and often differs depending on the movie. Sometimes there may be more than eight sequences, sometimes less. Determining how many sequences, what is the high-point, low-point, twist, culminations etc. is often a matter of debate. The important thing to remember is that the purpose of determining sequences and using sequence structure is to assist you in the shaping of your own stories. The audience doesn't care what you call a sequence or how many you say there are. All that matters is that they help you in the act of effective creation.