McKee Story Principles

Story Principles
Robert McKee

Story is about principles not rules.

Story is about eternal, universal forms, not formulas.

Story is about archetypes not stereotypes.

The mark of a master is to select only a few moments but give us a lifetime.

Structure is a selection of events from the characters' life stories that is composed into a strategic sequence to arouse specific emotions and to express a specific view of life.

A story event creates meaningful change in the life situation of a character that is expressed and experienced in terms of a value.

Story values are the universal qualities of human experience that may shift from positive to negative, or negative to positive form one moment to the next.

A story event creates a meaningful change in the life situation of a character that is expressed and experienced in terms of a value and achieved through conflict.

A scene is an action through conflict in more or less continuous time and space that turns the value-charged condition of a character's life on at least one value with a degree of perceptible significance. Ideally, every scene is a story event.

A beat is an exchange of behavior in action/reaction. Beat by beat these changing behaviors shape the turning of a scene.

A sequence is a series of scenes – generally two to five – that culminates with greater impact than any previous scenes.

An act is a series of sequences that peaks in a climatic scene which causes a major reversal of values, more powerful in its impact that any previous sequence or scene.

Story climax is a series of acts that build to a last act climax that brings about absolute and irreversible change.

A plot means to navigate through the dangerous terrain of story and when confronted by a dozen branching possibilities to choose the correct path. Plot is the writer's choice of events and their design in time.

Classical design creates the arch plot and means a story built around an active protagonist who struggles against primarily external forces of antagonism to pursue his or her desire, through continuous time, within a consistent and causally connected fictional reality, to a closed ending of absolute, irreversible change. Film examples: *Chinatown, The Hustler, Men in Black, Thelma & Louise, Dr. Stanglelove*.

Minimalistic design creates the miniplot and begins with elements of classical design but then reduces them by shrinking, compressing, trimming or truncating them. It does not mean no plot but rather strives for simplicity and economy while retaining enough classical design that the film will satisfy the audience. Film examples: *Five Easy Pieces, Blow Up, Tender Mercies, The Accidental Tourist*.

Anti-structure design creates the antiplot and doesn't reduce classical but rather reverses it by contradicting traditional forms to exploit, perhaps even ridicule, the very idea of formal principles. Rarely interested in understatement or quiet austerity. Rather to make clear his or her revolutionary ambitions the film tends toward extravagance and self-conscious overstatement. Film examples: *Wayne's World, 8 ½, That Obscure Object of Desire, Weekend*.

<u>Formal Differences Within Classical, Minimal and Antiplot</u>

• Closed Versus Open Endings
A story climax of absolute, irreversible change that answers all questions raised by the telling and satisfies all audience emotion is a closed ending. A story climax that leaves a question or two unanswered and some emotion unfulfilled is an open ending.

• External Versus Internal Conflict

• Single Versus Multiple Protagonists

• Active Versus Passive Protagonists
An active protagonist, in the pursuit of desire, takes action in direct conflict with the people and the world around him. A passive protagonist is outwardly inactive while pursuing desire inwardly, in conflict with aspects of his or her own nature.

• Linear Versus Nonlinear Time

A story with or without flashbacks and arranged into a temporal order of events that the audience can follow is told in linear time. A story that either skips helter-skelter through time or so blurs temporal continuity that the audience cannot sort out what happens before and after what is told in nonlinear time.

• Causality Versus Coincidence

Causality drives a story in which motivated actions cause effects that in turn become the causes of yet other effects that in turn become causes of yet other effects, thereby interlinking the various levels of conflict in a chain reaction of episodes to the story climax, expressing interconnectedness of reality. Coincidence drives a fictional world in which unnoticed actions trigger events that do not cause further effects and therefore fragment the story into divergent episodes and an open ending, expressing the disconnectedness of existence.

• Consistent Versus Inconsistent Realities

Consistent realities are fictional settings that establish modes of interaction between characters and their world that are kept consistently throughout the telling to create meaning. Inconsistent realities are settings that mix modes of interaction so that the story's episodes jump inconsistently from one reality to another to create a sense of absurdity.

• Change Versus Stasis

A story's setting is four-dimensional containing period, duration, location and level of conflict. Period is a story's place in time. Duration is a story's length through time. Location is a story's place in space. Level of conflict is the story's position on the hierarchy of human struggles.

A story must obey its own internal laws of probability. The event choices of the writer are limited to the possibilities and probabilities within the world he creates.

Genre conventions are specific settings, roles, events and values that define individual genres and their subgenres.

True character is revealed in the choice a human being makes under pressure – the greater the pressure, the deeper the revelation, the deeper the revelation, the truer the choice to the character's essential nature. How the person chooses to act under pressure is who he is. The greater the pressure, the truer and deeper the choice to character.

Character arc is the arcs or changes that inner nature, for better or worse, over the course of the telling.

The function of structure is to provide progressively building pressures that force characters into more and more difficult dilemmas where they must make more and more difficult risk-taking

choices and actions, gradually revealing their true natures, even down to the unconscious self.

The function of character is to bring the story the qualities of characterization necessary to convincingly act out choices. A character must be credible, young enough or old enough, strong or weak, worldly or naïve, educated or ignorant, generous or selfish, witty or dull in the right proportions. Each much bring to the story the combinations of qualities that allows an audience to believe that the character could and would do what he does.

Premise is the idea that inspires the writers desire to create a story. Premise is concrete and is what actually happens. Example. *The Godfather*: The youngest son of a Mafia family takes revenge on the men who shot his father and becomes the new Godfather.

Controlling idea is the story's ultimate meaning expressed through action and aesthetic emotion of the last act's climax. May be expressed in a single sentence describing how and why life undergoes change from one condition or existence at the beginning to another at the end.

Designing principle is the strategy for how one tells their story. The designing principle is abstract, the deeper process going on in the story. The seed of the story. An overall strategy for how you will tell your story. This overall strategy, stated in one line, is the designing principle of the story. This helps you extend the premise into deep structure. The designing principle is what organizes the story as a whole. It is the internal logic of the story, what makes the parts hang together organically so that the story becomes greater than the sum of its parts. It is what makes the story original. Ex: *Tootsie*. Premise. When an actor can't get work, he disguises himself as a woman and gets a role in a TV series only to fall in love with one of the female members of the cast. Designing principle. Force a male chauvinist to live as a woman.

Storytelling is the creative demonstration of truth. A story is the living prof of an idea, the conversation of idea to action. A story's event structure is the means by which the writer first expresses then proves his idea without explanation.

Protagonist. Is a willful character with a conscious desire but might also have a self-contradictory unconscious desire. Has the capacities to pursue the object of desire convincingly. Must have at least one chance to attain his desire. Has the will and the capacity to pursue the object of his conscious/and or unconscious desire to the end of the line to the human limit established by setting and genre. Must be empathetic and may or may not be sympathetic.

In story, the concentration is on the moment in which a character takes an action expecting a useful reaction from his world but instead the effect is to provoke forces of antagonism. The world of the character reacts differently than expected, more powerfully than expected or both.

The measure of the value of a character's desire is in direct proportion to the risk he's willing to take to achieve it. The greater the value, the greater the risk.

Inciting incident radically upsets the balance of forces in the protagonist's life. The protagonist must react to the inciting incident.

For better or worse, an event throws a character's life out of balance arousing in him the conscious and/or unconscious desire for that which he feels will restore balance, launching him on a quest for his object of desire against forces of antagonism (inner, personal, extra-personal). He may or may not achieve it.

A story must not retreat to actions of lesser quality or magnitude but more progressively forward to a final action beyond which the audience cannot imagine another.

A subplot may be used to contradict the controlling idea (premise) of the central plot and thus enrich the story with irony. Subplots may be used to resonate the premise of the central plot and enrich the story with variations on the theme. When the central plot's inciting incident must be delayed, a setup subplot might be needed to open the storytelling. A subplot may be used to complicate the central plot.

The choice between good and evil or right and wrong is no choice at all. Everyone tries to make good or right choice as they perceive it.

Progression. When a story genuinely progresses, it calls upon greater and greater human capacity, demands greater and greater willpower, generates greater and greater change in character's lives and places them in greater and greater jeopardy. Social progression widens the character actions into society. Personal progression drive actions deeply into the intimate relationships and inner lives of characters.

Ascension or symbolic progression. Build on the symbolic charge of the story's imagery from the particular to the universal, the specific to the archetypal. Start with actions, locations and roles that represent only themselves. As the story progresses, chose images that gather greater and greater meaning, until by the end of the telling characters, settings and events stand for universal ideas.

Ironic ascension turns progression into irony. Sees life in duality and plays with our paradoxical existence. Plays between actions and results, appearance and reality. Six ironic story patterns:

• H gets what always wanted but too late to enjoy it.
• H pushed further and further from his goal only to discover that he's been led right to it.
• H throws away what he later finds is indispensable to his happiness.
• H to reach goal he unwittingly takes precise steps necessary to lead him away from it.
• H takes action to destroy something and becomes exactly what is needed to be destroyed by it.

• H comes into possession of something he's certain will make him miserable, does everything possible to get rid of it only to discover it's the gift of happiness.

Principle of transition. Between two scenes, need a link that joins tail of scene A with head of scene B. Examples:

      Characterization trait. In common: cut from bratty child to childish adult. Opposition: cut from awkward protagonist to elegant antagonist.

      Action. In common: From foreplay of lovemaking to savoring the afterglow. Opposition: from chatter to cold silence.

      Object. In common: from greenhouse interior to woodland exterior. Opposition: from the Congo to Antartica.

      Word. In common: A phrase repeated from scene to scene. Opposition: From compliment to curse.

      Quality of light. In common: from shadows at dawn to shade in sunset. Opposition: blue to red.

      Sound. In common: waves lapping a shore to rise and fall of a sleeper's breath. Opposition: from silk caressing skin to the grinding of gears.

      Idea. In common: from a child's birth to an overture. Opposition: from a painter's empty canvass to an old man dying.

Crisis. This dilemma confronts the protagonist who, when face-to-face with the most powerful and focused forces of antagonism in his life, must make a decision to take one action or another in a last effort to achieve his object of desire. Must be a deliberately static moment. Freeze this moment.

Climax. Not necessarily full of noise and violence. Rather, it must be full of meaning. It is meaning that produces emotion. Meaning is a revolution in values form positive to negative or negative to positive with or without irony, a value swing at maximum charge that's absolute and irreversible. The meaning of that change moves the heart of the audience.

A story that progresses to the limit of human experience in depth and breadth of conflict must move through a pattern that includes the contrary, the contradictory and the negation of the negation.

Backstory. Powerful revelations come from the backstory – previous significant events in the lives of the characters that the writer can reveal at critical moments to create turning points.

Flashbacks. First, dramatize them rather than flashing back to flat scenes. Second, do not bring in a flashback until you have created in the audience the need and desire to know.

Mystery. In mystery, the audience knows less than the characters.

Suspense. The audience and characters know the same information.

Dramatic Irony. The audience knows more than the characters.

Coincidence. Bring in early to allow time to build meaning from it. Never use to turn an ending. This is deus ex machine, the writer's greatest sin.

Image System. Strategy of motifs. A category of imagery embedded in the film that repeats in sight and sound from beginning to the end with persistence and great variation, but with equally subtlety, as subliminal communication to increase the depth and complexity of aesthetic emotion.