

## Excerpt from Joan Erskine's book, *Watch Movies, Learn Screenwriting*

Included is an abbreviated version of the *Essential Moments Screenplay Outline*. This outline will help you plot your entire film. However, instead of including examples from seven films as we do in *Watch Movies, Learn Screenwriting*, this abbreviated version uses only examples from *Little Miss Sunshine*.

### The Essential Moments Outline

By now you have a story idea and a protagonist, and you know a lot about what's going to happen. The Essential Moments Screenplay Outline will guide you to plot your story (choose events and their timing) so that *what*, *how*, and *when* it all happens will fully dramatize the protagonist's transformation along the character arc and engage the audience. The Essential Moments Screenplay Outline is a tool that can be used again and again on each screenplay you write. It follows well-known concepts that make three-act structure an effective storytelling method and will help you expand your ongoing summary and notes into a fully realized screenplay!

Building the structure of a story can be seen as mapping out the scenes in a way that causes the story to flow forward and deliver the message or theme. It is to design the route by which the protagonist moves toward his or her potential transformation. The Essential Moments Screenplay Outline is made up of eleven *moments* in three-act structure during which a specific type of event usually occurs. Each moment has a brief description about the nature, function, and purpose it serves, and is demonstrated by examples from our core films. This is followed by "Your Turn," a space to write what will happen in *your* story at this moment in the structure. You can write a scene, a line of dialogue, or an action, or you can simply make notes about what will happen. Eventually, as you write your screenplay, countless other scenes and actions of your choosing will surround the eleven essential moments.

Many writers and teachers teach these moments (events) in three-act structure. They mimic stages of transformation in real life, which is why this structure can produce a story that has integrity rather than being merely formulaic. Because the story is about the protagonist's transformation, all of the moments directly or indirectly reflect him or her, regardless of other plot and character details.

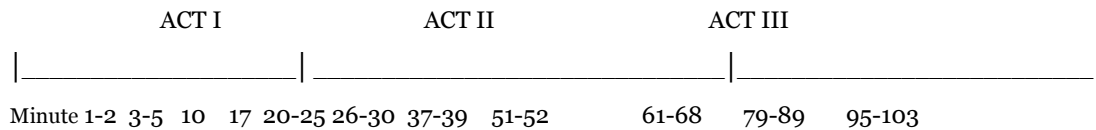
Each moment in our model outline is listed by the minute it occurs in a film of 103 minutes, which is the length of *Little Miss Sunshine*. Although the essential moments are listed by the literal minute they occur, they are actually strategic *places* within the acts. Therefore, the timing of the moments will differ from film to film, depending on each film's actual length.

The following diagram provides a visual understanding of where the moments occur. This can act as a template for a story of any length. One page of a screenplay equals one minute of screen time, so the minute is the same as the page number. Most current feature-length screenplays fall

between 90 and 120 minutes. If this is your first screenplay, make it easy. Work within these parameters.

## The Essential Moments

### 103-Minute Film



## A Few Suggestions About Scene Development

As you work the Essential Moments Screenplay Outline, notice how writers use actions, events, locations, and timing to make scenes interesting.

*Events* and *actions* in our core group are all compelling and integral to the story, but they differ greatly. In *The Jane Austen Book Club*, the events are subtle—Jocelyn glances in a darkened window; comments about Grigg’s eyes. In *No Country for Old Men*, events are dramatic—Llewelyn stands in the desert among dead men and gets shot at; Chigurh, in danger of bleeding to death, blows up a car in Mexico, then limps unnoticed into a drugstore.

While actions are often the point of the scene, sometimes they reveal character, set the tone, and work to keep our interest as we absorb the message of the scene as conveyed in the dialogue. Here’s an example where the action is so riveting it almost obscures the words: A woman stares into a mirror, conversing with a man she’s watching in the mirror, all the while using a safety pin to separate eyelashes laden with mascara! This occurs as Joanne Herring speaks to Charlie Wilson in a scene from *Charlie Wilson’s War*, screenplay by Aaron Sorkin. In this case the image stays with you long after you’ve forgotten the primary purpose of the scene—the spoken message.

*Interesting locations* set up the story, establish mood and tone, and catch our attention by showing us something unique or in a new way. Sometimes the location is integral to the story, meaning that the story is to a significant degree *about* the location. The 2008 documentary *Man on Wire* tells the story of Philippe Petit’s amazing and illegal tightrope performance across the top of the World Trade Center’s Twin Towers in 1974. The location is integral. Other times, locations are tools that compel our attention, heighten the drama, convey mood, and reveal

character. Think, for example, of Roger Thornhill being chased by a crop-dusting plane across a cornfield in Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*. The setting, which renders the character extremely vulnerable, is nearly as menacing as the attacking airplane.

*Timing* is another important tool. Entering scenes late—that is, in the midst of the action or dialogue—is a powerful way to propel the story forward. Entering late bypasses unnecessary information, which increases the pace and forces the tension and conflict forward. Check out the thriller *Heat*. Written and directed by Michael Mann, every scene bristles with tension due in part because we enter the scenes in the middle and sometimes at the end. While Mann is a genius at scene development in thrillers, the rule itself—to create tension and conflict—is true whether you're writing a drama or a family comedy. Notice the timing of the scenes in *Home Alone*.

## The Essential Moments Outline

**Crescendo: a gradual, steady increase and buildup in intensity or force**

### ACT I

#### Moments 1–25

Each act plays a specific role in dramatizing the story. Act 1 sets up the story. In Act 1 the audience learns the status quo, the state of things at the beginning of the story. Act 1 introduces characters, establishes mood, and grabs the audience's attention. Usually something occurs near the end of this Act that ignites the story, an event that disrupts the status quo and forces the protagonist into action. Typically, we meet the protagonist in the first act and learn about his goals and needs.

#### Moments 1–2: In the Beginning

- Establish mood or tone.
- Introduce the protagonist and other significant characters.
- Reveal the protagonist's status quo—how things are in his life as the story begins.
- The opening scene may be like one half of a pair of bookends, meaning the last scene will mirror the first one, with the story “sandwiched” between two related scenes. These scenes may show the same event taking place but at a different stage or place. By returning

to this scene, we reveal a new layer of meaning, a new dimension, something that reflects the change and growth that has resulted from the events of the story. The bookend effect can also be achieved by having a character begin telling the story during an opening scene, perhaps in a voiceover, and then concluding the story in the final scene with the same technique. In this case, the scene or location may be different, but the voice provides the bookends. This occurs in *Million Dollar Baby* and *No Country for Old Men*. Bookends reflect the protagonist’s transformation.

Let’s look at how our film uses “In the Beginning.”

*Little Miss Sunshine*: Moments 1–2

- In minute 1, we see Olive, a young, slightly plump girl, studying a video of a beauty pageant.
- Camera still on Olive, we hear Richard’s voice saying that people are either winners or losers. Camera switches to Richard, who is addressing an audience, promoting his nine-step self-help seminar. Seconds later we see his audience—ten people scattered around a small classroom. The mood and tone (a drama, possibly lighthearted) of the film have been established, along with the status quo of Richard, the protagonist: he’s an inspirational speaker promoting the necessity of winning rather than losing, but he himself appears to be losing.
- The audience doesn’t know it yet, but moments 1–2 have introduced the two main characters and shown us what the story is about—the meaning of success as it is revealed in the contexts of a beauty pageant and a self-help business.

Your Turn: “In the Beginning”

For your screenplay, write a scene, description, or short summary that shows how moments 1–2 will set the mood and tone and possibly show where and when the story takes place. Will it be dark, lighthearted, whimsical, or frightening? Do we meet the protagonist? Once you know your story well enough, you may decide to make this the first half of a pair of bookends.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Moments 3-5: What's It All About?

A scene, a line of dialogue, or an action often occurs here that tells the audience what the story will be about. This doesn't mean the audience recognizes the full meaning of the words or actions right away, even in a case where these issues are as blatant as in, for example, *As Good as It Gets*. In that film, in approximately minute 3, Melvin Udall's neighbor accuses him of not loving anyone. As the story unfolds, however, we learn that there is more to it than that statement implies: Melvin needs to learn *how* to love.

Here's how our film shows us "What's It All About?"

*Little Miss Sunshine*: Moment 2. Here's how screenwriter Michael Arndt sets up the story: Richard tell his students, "Inside each of you—at the very core of your being—is a winner waiting to be awakened . . . and unleashed upon the world." Naively, Richard doesn't recognize that he still needs to learn what winning really means in order to see himself as a winner.

### Your Turn: "What's It All About?"

Write a line of dialogue or action, or a brief summary that reveals what your story and your character's transformation will be about.

---

---

---





---

---

## Moment 17: The First Major Plot Point: Ignite the Fire

In most films, an event occurs around the seventeenth minute of the film that ignites the story by challenging the main character and life as he knows it. This event is a conflict that kick-starts the protagonist's transformation on the character arc by forcing him to do something new—to change, handle, control, respond, cope, or react to the situation. This event is known by many names: plot point, inciting incident, catalyst, or, in simplest terms, the twist that changes the direction of the story. In a romantic comedy, the first major plot point may simply be that the protagonist meets someone new (this is often called a “meet-cute” situation to signify the cute or adorable fashion in which the future couple meets). To make it more complicated, perhaps the protagonist discovers that the woman he has just developed a crush on is his brother's fiancée (as in the 2007 romantic comedy *Dan in Real Life*). In a drama, it could be that the protagonist gets fired or his spouse dies. In a thriller, perhaps bandits take a subway train hostage or rob a bank. The protagonist cannot ignore this event. It immediately changes the protagonist's life because he now has to engage with this new set of circumstances. This plot point must be strong enough to compel the audience to want to know how the character will handle the predicament. While the reactions of the protagonist will be the beginning of his transformation, at the time of the event he usually doesn't recognize the depth and significance of this challenge.

Here's how our film “Ignites the Fire.”

*Little Miss Sunshine*: This plot point occurs at moment 16, when Olive hears the message on the answering machine telling her she's a contestant for the Little Miss Sunshine Beauty Pageant and that she has to be in Redondo Beach by this Sunday. This event sets the entire family in motion, including Richard, who doesn't have a clue how much this event is going to influence his own life.

### Your Turn: “Ignite the Fire”

Create a scene showing what happens to cause your protagonist to do something different. This event launches the story by upsetting the status quo and causing your protagonist to respond in some way. Write the actual scene or a description of it with as many details as you know.





Here are the actions that produce “Whew! For a minute there . . .” in our film.

*Little Miss Sunshine*: During moments 17–24, the entire family argues about who will take Olive to the contest. In minute 20, encouraged by Richard, Olive proclaims she is going to win. Satisfied, Richard declares they’re going to California! Richard initially believes this is a minor, inconvenient task on his way to attaining his “real” goal of securing a contract with Stan. However, it’s his first step toward achieving true success because he’s making a sacrifice for his family that will eventually lead him through a transformation. The entire family travels in their Volkswagen bus, and they begin to rediscover one another, but Grandpa provokes Richard by giving sexual advice to Dwayne and by declaring that heroin is valuable for someone old. End of Act I

Your Turn: “Whew! For a Minute There . . .”

Write your protagonist’s first step in handling this new challenge, either as a scene, a line of dialogue, an action, or a brief summary. Remember, your protagonist is *reacting* and *motivated*.

## **ACT II**

### **Moments 26–76**

In Act II the characters confront the conflicts from Act I. The “labor” required for the protagonist’s transformation takes place here in the form of actions taken to overcome the obstacles. All the while he strives toward his goals, these problems increasingly escalate, build tension, raise the stakes, and challenge the protagonist further. Along the way he gains victories, large and small. These are the building blocks of his growth, and they strengthen, empower, and encourage him to continue. Act II is often thought of as comprising two parts, with a strong climax occurring in the middle. This climax often results from an action or confrontation that causes the protagonist to advance from merely reacting to events to responding with initiative and empowerment. The resulting shift lays the ground work for personal power that later helps the protagonist complete a transformation during Act III. Additionally, the second major plot point most often occurs near the end of Act II.

Here's an example of why I describe the essential moments as guidelines, not rules. In *Fargo*, which won the 1996 Academy Award for Best Screenplay, protagonist Marge Gunderson doesn't enter the story until ACT II. Watch the film to see how the story is set up within Act I without the main character being present.

## Act II (Part 1) Moments 26–51

### Moments 26–30: Just A Minor Detour

At this point, the character has caught his breath and come up with a plan that produces more positive results, enough to keep him moving forward. New conflicts usually continue to occur (crescendo). He's still *reacting*, but his strategy offers enough success to build some confidence.

He is likely settling into his new goal and may even begin enjoying himself. At this point, this challenge in his life may seem a minor and manageable detour, and he still assumes he'll return to his original status quo.

Here is how "A Minor Detour" looks in our film:

*Little Miss Sunshine*: In moments 25–27, everyone bonds by supporting Olive against Richard's advice to avoid ice cream and getting fat. This scene heightens the tension, reveals the theme, and propels the story forward by pitting Richard and his approach to success against everyone else. It also demonstrates how Richard's judgmental attitude keeps him frustrated and alienated from others. Despite this, they have all begun their journey, and even Richard believes the situation is manageable.

### Your Turn: "A Minor Detour"

Write a line of dialogue, an action, a scene, or a description of what will happen that shows us how the character has begun to deal with the problem. This doesn't have to mean the character is happy, but things seem a little more under control because he or she has a plan and is taking initial steps.

---

---

---







Just as a story requires something to set it in motion—the first major plot point, which upset the status quo—a story also needs something that changes the course yet again, this time initiating the resolution. The second major plot point is an event that in some way makes it possible for the protagonist to resolve the conflicts and conclude the story in Act III.

Each essential moment has played a certain role at a specific stage to dramatize the protagonist's transformation. By the last part of Act II, she has confronted conflict after conflict and she's held her own—she's still in there. The story now requires something that brings everything to a head in order to turn toward the ending. The key to accomplishing this is to demonstrate that things have changed. Here's how it often works. An event occurs that is usually extreme, often appears insurmountable, and challenges the protagonist's ability to go the full course. The good news is, *it often results in the protagonist quitting!* Initially, that is.

Quitting, or the temptation to give up, has an essential purpose in a story. If the protagonist doesn't reach the point of thinking about quitting, it means that this current challenge has not pushed her to the point where she had previously caved in, or she hadn't reached the root of this issue in her own life, or she hadn't reached the pivotal moment of change. Quitting brings everything into focus by bringing the protagonist to a *now or never* moment—exactly what the story needs in order to turn toward its conclusion.

We've spoken about how goals and needs must be strong. This event now makes it obvious that the protagonist had better do something new because it may be the last chance for something such as love, success, redemption, or life itself. Quitting puts everything at stake, creating the ultimate opportunity for change by offering a chance to turn quitting into *not quitting*.

What helps her not quit? After the protagonist does quit, another event reminds her she is someone who has already won, fought, or acted in a new way that is genuinely her own. This realization produces a sense of empowerment. This time, instead of walking away, she recognizes this latest challenge as an opportunity to use these new strengths—to turn quitting and failing into staying and succeeding. She's definitely no longer merely reacting but, even better, she now acts from a genuine, authentic place within. She takes charge of her destiny!

This second event could be anything ranging from a discovery that causes the protagonist to learn something new about herself; an uncovering of clues that reveal an answer to a mystery; something that allows a character to face a limitation, or an event that confirms her view of a situation. Unlike her feeling of disorientation or anxiety after she took charge at the midpoint, she now genuinely owns this new way of being and enjoys the sense of inner strength it brings. Of course, she may be a bit shaky because it's still new. The decisions, actions, or choices she makes here and later during Act III do not necessarily produce happiness—the story may be about making an undesirable life change, such as Sheriff Bell does in *No Country for Old Men*. However, they do produce a sense of integrity and authenticity. In other words, a protagonist's success may mean achieving inner needs, but not necessarily original goals, as we'll see with Sheriff Bell.

Quitting can be a subtle rather than a literal action. It might be a mere change in facial expression that shows the character hopeless and lethargic; it could be letting someone leave, as Jerry Maguire does when he accepts Dorothy’s decision to separate. On the other hand, it can also be played out through big actions or powerful dialogue, such as in *Bad Santa*, when Willie first attempts suicide but erupts in a huge turnaround at the sight of The Kid being harmed.

As the character shifts to empowerment, the danger will probably continue to escalate. Ah yes, crescendo—but the end is now in sight and the final resolution is just around the corner in Act III.

Here’s how “The Second Major Plot Point—Now or Never” looks in our films.

*Little Miss Sunshine*: This crushing event occurs minutes after Grandpa’s death. In moment 50, the bereavement liaison tells Richard that he can’t take Grandpa’s body to Albuquerque or California. Richard’s heart sinks at the idea of not getting Olive to the contest, but he digs deeper—he’s not giving up. Why should he? He’s someone who told Stan to get lost! He’s survived an insurmountable problem—losing his dream. Instead of being weaker, he’s stronger and more powerful. At approximately Moment 52, Richard decides he’s taking Grandpa with them. Richard assigns tasks to each family member as he supervises the covert operation of sneaking Grandpa’s body out the hospital window into the van as it is moving, and by moment 55 they have successfully kidnapped Grandpa’s body. Richard is exhilarated. The rest of Act II consists of Richard breaking down barrier after barrier to get his daughter to the contest. He’s acting from his core and has personal power to spare.

### Your Turn: “The Second Major Plot Point—Now or Never”

Write a scene or a note indicating what event occurs near the end of the second act that changes the course of your story, making the resolution of the conflicts possible in the last act. It could be an event that stops your protagonist in his or her tracks, and then a second event happens to remind the character of newly found courage, determination, and abilities. What are the actions your character does that demonstrate his or her new way of being and pushes the story forward?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---





confident, smarter, and seemingly more reckless, and they may also be uncertain because his new way of being is, well, still new. In a romantic comedy or love story, the character may allow himself to feel vulnerable as he struggles and earns his way into someone’s heart. In a drama she may put a difficult or courageous plan into action, as Edna Spalding does in *Places in the Heart*. In the last act, Edna tries to save her home by picking her own cotton in hopes of winning the \$100 First Cotton Prize. Bloodied and exhausted, Edna, her children, Margaret, Moze, and a few laborers work under the Texas sun and through blackness of night. Whatever the action, it’s a sign the protagonist is close to being fully evolved to a new place within. This will often be where he or she achieves (or begins to achieve) his or her true needs. The situation will soon be settled, happily or otherwise.

Here’s how “Final Hurdles, Hitches, and Hindrances” look in our films:

*Little Miss Sunshine*: Toward the end of Act II, Richard gave Olive a pep talk that lacked confidence and sounded disheartened, even sad. Richard is in unknown territory—he knows his daughter is going to lose and he is powerless to help her. He grasps that his way hasn’t been effective but he hasn’t achieved a new way. Now, in Act III, approximately minute 87, Richard suggests to Sheryl that they shouldn’t let Olive go on. Dwight suddenly steps in and it’s he who fights to keep Olive from going on. Richard is in unknown territory and stands aside, noticing and taking in from his family the strength and wisdom he has long sought. Although he has realized Olive does not have to perform, he still thinks “winning” depends on the contest results. Still, he’s inching closer to recognizing that Olive’s experience will determine her success, not public outcome.

### Your Turn: “Final Hurdles, Hitches, and Hindrances”

Describe the last hurdle and what action your protagonist takes, or insight he gains, that will enable him to leap up and over it. What does the character begin or do to resolve the problem in a way that feels right and satisfying? It may not be a happy event, but it has integrity, a sense that the character has evolved to this point because his previous actions and successes have earned him know-how, courage, insight, or all-encompassing determination to win. Write a scene, a line of dialogue, or description about what occurs.

---

---

---

---



