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STORYTELLING STRATEGIES

Although screen stories have unique qualities particular to film, screen stories for short and long films more often than not share characteristics with other kinds of storytelling. In this chapter we will discuss those general qualities and suggest links to other forms of storytelling, forms that provide the first and best source of material for short films.

STORY QUALITIES

All stories must engage the curiosity of an audience, whether that audience be one or a thousand. The storyteller must build on that curiosity to engage the viewer in the life of a character; that engagement must grow to identification; and so on. The storyteller must engage our curiosity, invite our involvement in a character's situation, and finally allow the viewer to identify with the character and the situation.

To hold the audience and move it through the story, a variety of devices are used. Some are operating principles, others are artificial techniques, but in each case the goal is the same—to move the audience from curiosity to a more emotional state. If the story works, the results can range from amusement to tragedy. But in each case, it is the storytelling qualities that transcend medium and that engage audiences.

These story qualities can be broken down into two groups: *character qualities*, and *plot qualities*. The primary character quality of a story is that we have to identify with the main character. We have to become concerned with his or her dilemma, and we have to care about the outcome.

In order to identify with the characters, we have to know who they are and how they've arrived at the point where we join the story. A main character may be active or passive, young or old, male or female. These qualities should be specific and appropriate to the story; it is no use to tell a story about a passive Olympic athlete, because the drive to become an Olympic

athlete requires, by definition, a forceful rather than passive character. Specificity about culture, family, and career is also helpful in creating a person we recognize.

What are the person's goals? What are his or her hopes, dreams, fears? Any or all of these details can also help create a recognizable character. That recognition is the first step toward identification—if we recognize the character and his or her situation, we will begin to connect with the character.

As much as our identification with the main character relies on recognizing and caring about the character, that identification can be equally influenced by the role of the antagonist. The antagonist can be a mountain, a desert, or a raging storm, as well as an angry father, an overprotective mother, an unjust boss. Often the most interesting antagonist of all can be one's self: our own flaws (fear greed, anger, passivity) can play the role of the enemy.

As we have observed, the more forceful the antagonist in a story, the greater the struggle of the protagonist. If the goal of the story is to portray heroic behavior, the role of the antagonist can be crucial. If the goal is more to portray realism and complexity in the protagonist's actions, here too the character of the antagonist is critical.

It is notable that the character of the protagonist and antagonist are very often opposites. This may be in appearance as well as behavior. This *polarity* is the most overt use of opposites in storytelling. Polarized characteristics are also used with characters other than protagonists or antagonists, and to good effect. The greater the number of polarities in the story, the greater the conflict and the resulting interest to the reader, listener, or viewer. Polarity is an extremely useful storytelling device.

Plot qualities are closely related to character, but because they involve events outside of character, they can be considered separately. A good example of this notion is the role of conflict in storytelling: the more powerful the barriers that stand in the way of the character achieving his or her goal, the more compelling the plot. If the character faces no barriers in achieving his or her goal, there is no story. This is the nature and the role of conflict in storytelling—to provide barriers to the characters and their goals.

What if the character does not have a goal? This will pose a problem for developing a conflict. What if the character's goal is unrealistic? The storyteller may focus on the conflict inherent in discovering that the goal is unattainable. In both examples, the linkage of conflict to character is intentional. Plot cannot stand alone, outside of character, without the story being penalized. Character, plot, and conflict are intricately related to one another. One dimension of conflict is how much a character wants to achieve his or her goal. Do they want, do they desire, do they need to achieve this goal? The greater the desire of the character, the greater the potential for conflict. The parallel with regard to the plot is also true: the more powerful the resistance, whether through the antagonist or other forces, the greater the conflict potential. It is useful to restate that barriers to the character's goal may be external (a place, another person) or internal. What is most important to the story is that the viewers or readers understand that the barriers are the source of conflict for the character. In the most simple fable, such as "The Tortoise and the Hare," or a more complex short story, such as Hemingway's "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," the sources of conflict are clear to the readers, and through the story they become clear to the protagonist.

Whether the character succeeds, as in "The Tortoise and the Hare," or fails, as in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," it is the struggle to overcome the barriers that is the fabric of the story. In each case the motivation of the protagonist seems primal, and that desire fuels our identification and understanding. Good stories tend to have a powerful conflict associated with a character we understand and whose desire fuels the story.

PLOT STRUCTURE

The first notable characteristic of a good story is that it presents an interesting interpretation of a situation that, on one level, we have seen before. A specific example will illustrate this. We are all familiar with the experience of the first day of school; the situation conjures up all kinds of associations for each person. Building on our familiarity with this situation, we can make it more interesting and arouse curiosity by introducing a new factor—the age of the new student. What if the new student in the local high school is forty years old, and he is joining a class full of fourteen-year-olds? The key here is that there is comfort for the viewer or reader in known situations—birthdays, weddings, funerals, and first days in school. The good storyteller uses our knowledge of the situation and whets our appetite for the story by introducing a new element.

Another factor in the plot is that point at which the storyteller chooses to join the story. It is crucial that we join the story at a point where the dramatic possibilities of the story can be maximized. The goal of the storyteller is to energize the tale, and the point of entry is critical in accomplishing this goal. A few examples are instructive. We join Ambrose Bierce's short story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" at the point when a civilian has been caught trespassing on a bridge held by Union soldiers during the Civil War.[1] Will the unfortunate Southerner live or die for his transgression? This question forms the substance of the story that unfolds.

At the beginning of Raymond Carver's short story "Cathedral," a blind man, who has recently lost his wife, plans to visit an old friend and her husband.[2] The issue is whether the friend's rocky marriage can bear a visitation from a sightless rival. The main character is the husband in the problematic relationship. The announcement of the visit is the point at which we join the story.

Good storytellers will find a point to join a story that will serve to generate tension and attract attention. If we do not join the story at such a point, not only is dramatic opportunity lost, but the chance to harness our curiosity will be lost. We will, in effect, be waiting for the story to begin. To

summarize: an interesting situation, a strong entry point, and enough conflict are necessary to start the story.

PLOT STRATEGIES

In order to carry us through the story, the storyteller will rely on two plot strategies—*surprise* (or *reversal*), and a *rising level of action* in the course of the plot. Surprise is critical, because if we are maintained on a steady diet of what we expect, we become bored and leave the story. Part of the storyteller's task is to keep us from getting bored: to maintain, use, and stimulate our curiosity about the story.

Surprise may be found in an unexpected plot twist or an unexpected behavior on the part of the character. In either case, the reversal or surprise upsets our expectations; it maintains and builds upon our curiosity. Think about your favorite film or fairy tale. How often in the course of the film or the fairy tale are you surprised by the course of events? Just as we both suffer through and enjoy a roller coaster ride, we need the same pattern of plot movement in a story.

A notable difference between a roller coaster ride and a story, however, is that although there are pauses in a story, there tends to be a pattern of *rising action* rather than the peaks and valleys of a ride. That rising action means that the surprises in the plot become more intense as we move through the story. Only through this progression of greater surprises can the story move toward a climax.

Just as every joke has a punch line, every story has a climax. The climax is the payoff, the point at which the character's efforts against all odds are successful. The climax is the high point of the story, and for many storytellers the very reason for their writing, telling, or filming a story. Without a rising level of action, this culmination would not be a climax but merely another event in the story. Consequently, the action in the climactic scene tends to have an all-or-nothing quality. It is the scene in which the stakes are highest for the main character.

Every good story also has a sense of resolution. Too often the climax is mistaken for the resolution: the resolution is the aftermath of the climax. The resolution brings us back to an even state after having experienced a growing feeling of intensity. The resolution in terms of the plot is the very end of the plot.

REALISM VERSUS FANTASY

There is a general decision to be made by every storyteller, a decision that will affect how powerfully the audience engages the story. That decision is the choice of realism or fantasy as the storytelling mode. Good stories can be realistic or the opposite, fantastic, but the choice will affect how the storyteller deploys character and plot, among other things. If a story is realistic, the detailing of the plot and of character has to be convincing and recognizable. If, on the other hand, the choice is fantasy, the characterizations will be more representational or metaphorical. Realistic characterization is complex, believable, recognizable; in a fantasy, characters may represent a class, gender, or race. In other words, a character may be used as a metaphor for a purpose that serves the story, in this case a fantasy. Consequently, the level of detail will tend to be less. Plot, on the other hand, will become that much more important—because the character in a fantasy is not as easy to identify with as a realistic character would be. Consequently, the plot needs to involve the viewer more actively than the character alone can. The choice between realism or fantasy will help the storyteller determine how to deploy the other storytelling elements; devices, surprise, twists, and turns of plot are more important in the fantasy. The narrative devices are the writer's tools. In choosing a realist approach, the author opts for character devices; in fantasy, he or she opts for plot-oriented devices.

THE NEED FOR STORYTELLING

We need look no farther than the number of television channels—to say nothing of the number of hours that television broadcasts news stories, sports stories, nonfiction stories, and fiction stories, stories of all lengths—to realize the number of stories available to the public every day. Add the number of films, the number of newspapers and magazines, the number of oral stories (from jokes to anecdotes to elaborate tales, from gossip to reportage, from free association to analytic interpretation), and it is evident we are all telling stories. There are stories on every level, from casual to the most meaningful. It's not so much that we hunger for any one kind of story but rather that we need a full range of stories. Human experience functions on a wide band, from superficial to highly meaningful, and storytelling reflects human experience.

Why do we need stories? We need stories to help us make sense of our world. We need to make sense of the past and of the present, so that we can make our way to a future.

But there are other reasons stories have been important, beyond the need to understand, and one is the need of the teller to communicate. Whether in pantomime or Elizabethan tragedy, storytellers want to communicate with others. The cave painter and the short-film director may have different means, but both want to use their medium to bind artist and audience together for that instant or that half-hour of the storytelling experience. For that time, storyteller and audience become a community, with all the historical implications of the relationship between artist and audience. Another goal of storytelling is the education of the community. Many cultures have used storytelling to educate, particularly about the ethics of living in the society. The passing on of tradition and ethics has been a central focus of

storytelling, from the fairy tale to the fable to the documentary film. Finally, storytelling provides a legitimate access route to the world of our dreams and our fears; it provides an outlet for both of these types of psychic experiences. The goal of the story is to incorporate these dimensions of life into consciousness. Dreams and fears are important elements of storytelling.

SOURCES FOR STORYTELLING

Whether your goal is a contemporary story, a story specific to a culture, or a more universal story, there are many sources of inspiration, information, or insight.

Many writers and teachers of writing believe that the best source is your own experience. Our feeling is that your experience is only one of many sources. Should you choose your own experience for a story, the detailing of the story is clearly less problematic. The problem writers face with their own experience is their loyalty to the memory of that experience.

For example, John Updike uses personal experience and observations in the "Rabbit" series to tell a story about a man trying to understand his life as events and other people take control of it. He uses real concerns and real observations and applies them to a fictional character, in writing that shows this technique at its finest. This is how many writers proceed. Their loyalty is to the veracity of observation rather than to a detailed and literal reliving in writing, of their experience. Writers like Updike use observation to comment on themselves and their readers rather than to indulge in, relive, or purge themselves of a memory or experience. This is the creative response to experience and observation.

Writers can be more personal than Updike (like Clark Blaise), or they can be less personal, as Frederick Forsythe tends to be. Our advice is that personal experience is an excellent source of material but that considerations of narrative and audience should mediate between the totally personal and the opposite—the accessible, engaging story. The personal can often be self-indulgent and sophomoric, whereas the opposite tries to engage the audience more fully. The former leaves the audience as witnesses instead of participants.

There are many other sources of stories beyond personal recollection, the most obvious being the daily newspapers. What we would like to do in this chapter is to illustrate how periodical accounts and other sources can be used as the basis for excellent stories for short films. We begin with a magazine because it is one of the most readily available materials.

The Periodical Article as a Source

In February 1992, two years after reunification, the following story was reported from the former East Germany.[3] The recently opened Stasi (secret police) files had revealed that a thirty-year-old woman who had been involved in a human rights demonstration in the mid-1980s had for the next six years been under observation—and that the spy who had reported her activities throughout this time was her husband. She filed for divorce. Her husband stated in an interview that if the Communists had remained in control he would have continued to spy on her.

Here is a marital relationship—which, in an ideal world, we might expect to function to protect husband and wife from the problems and challenges of society, in this case a Communist regime in East Germany. This expectation proves to be wrong, since the husband represented the intrusive government and spied on his wife, whose activities defied the government's philosophy and policy. What we might expect to be the most cherished haven from Communism and government, the family unit, was therefore no protection for the individual. The implication is that there *is* no protection for the individual.

Although there is sufficient story potential here for a longer film, there are also a number of ways the story can be developed for a short one. The following is one suggestion for a short film script.

There are many points where it would be effective to join this story. We suggest that the drama is least interesting after the public discovery of the husband as a spy. What remains at that point is only resolution—what will happen to the marriage and to the husband and the wife (does he get his comeuppance?). We suggest that the presence of the state is important but needn't be elaborated. We also suggest that the story concentrate on the two characters in the marriage. A critical choice will be which character should be the main character. If it is to be the wife, the story should focus on the danger of her activities and her expectation that the haven from the danger is her marriage. In this version she needn't find out that he is a spy, but we in the audience have gradually to discover that and realize that she will suffer, without understanding why, for her activities.

On the other hand, if he is the main character, we want the story to focus on why a man has to betray his family for the state. Here he may be his own antagonist. The story line should focus not only on his betrayal but also on an understanding about his character—as the story in Bertolucci's *The Conformist* does. In *The Conformist*, set in Fascist Italy of the '30s, an upper-middle-class intellectual will do anything to belong; in this case, belonging means joining the Fascists. The rite of passage is a betrayal of his former professor.

We should confine the story to a very simple situation—let us say, the day of a human rights march. Let's assume that the woman is our main character. We needn't see the march itself but can confine the film to the preparations for the march and the aftermath. The scenes should clarify the relationship by highlighting the sense of trust on the part of the wife, and the planning and preparation of a report on the part of the husband. The government-controlled media—state radio, television, and newspapers—should be omnipresent. It may be necessary to embody the state in another

character—a neighbor, for example. If the person who represents the state is too far from home—at work, say—we would dilute the emphasis in the story on the immediate threat of spies at and near home. The closer the spies, the more intense the story will be.

We can distract the audience from the true nature of the neighbor by making the neighbor an attractive woman. The initial impression should be that the husband is having an affair, rather than reporting to another spy. This way, when we do discover that they are both spies, the surprise and shock will be that much greater. In this state spying, not sex, is the highest form of leisure and pleasure!

It would be useful to the story if the wife suspects the husband of an affair and if the climax of the film involves her accusation and his admission of an affair with the neighbor. But we will know that the truth is more sinister. She accepts the affair, and the marriage—and the spying—go on. The story can grow only more suspenseful because of her husband's activities.

This short film will have much in the way of conflict between wife and husband/neighbor/state, but the situation will be simple, no more than "a day in the life of." When the wife chooses to accept her husband's story of infidelity, we begin to understand that the real danger to the individual is not infidelity but rather the state. Her choice implies much about priorities and life in 1985 East Germany.

The approach we have taken in developing a magazine article into a short-film outline can be applied to any other source. We move now to a simple source, a joke.

The Joke

Jokes or anecdotes can readily be the source of a short film, since they have a character, a narrative, and a climax. The writer need only add another character or two and provide a resolution, so that the audience will not be left in an unresolved state regarding the fate of the main character. The following joke will provide a constructive example.

Mark Twain tells the story of trying to get rid of the wreck of an old umbrella. First, he threw it in the ash can, but someone recognized it as his and returned it. Then he dropped it down a deep well, but someone repairing the well saw the umbrella and returned it. He tried several other methods, but always the umbrella came back., "Finally," says Mark Twain, "I lent it to a friend, and I never saw it again."[4]

Not only does this particular joke have a simple narrative, a conflict, and a main character, but it also has interesting opportunities for sound—not dialogue, but rather the use of creative sound effects and music. Indeed it is possible to envision this script entirely without dialogue. It also has the virtues of visual action and of personal interaction that can be easily understood visually. A short script version should include some action that illustrates why the character needed the umbrella in the first place.

We recommend a time frame of a few hours, beginning with the character preparing to leave the house. His wife reminds him to take the umbrella, because rain is forecast. The character is already resentful. Of course his wife is right, but he doesn't like to be wrong.

He leaves home with a specific errand—to purchase particular foods for dinner. His wife provides him with a list. He proceeds to the food store but is caught in a terrible downpour. A gust of wind ruins his umbrella just before he reaches the food store. He carries in the ruined umbrella and proceeds to shop. When he's finished the clouds haven't quite blown over, so he keeps the umbrella. After he has walked about a block, the sun bursts out, and he makes his first attempt to discard the umbrella.

What follows are his three attempts to get rid of the umbrella. Twice he leaves the umbrella in an ash can, and twice a good citizen runs after him with it, once an adult and then a young boy.

Carrying the groceries and now the broken umbrella, he carries on. He drops the umbrella down a well near his home and goes home thinking no more of it. No sooner has he unpacked the groceries than a workman who had been in the well knocks on his door and returns the umbrella. Now he is more than irked. He wants to destroy this ruined umbrella. He can't put it in the garbage; the garbage man will no doubt return the precious object. He can't share the problem with his wife; she will not understand. Then it comes to him. He puts the umbrella back in the closet.

The next day it is raining heavily. He takes the broken umbrella and an unspoiled one and goes out for a walk. He sees his friend Don. Don is getting wet rushing to the grocery store, list in hand. Our main character displays the spare umbrella under his arm, basking in his dryness from the working umbrella. Naturally, Don asks if he can borrow an umbrella from him. The main character agrees and saunters back home. Don struggles with the broken umbrella. A subtitle tells us that the main character never sees the broken umbrella again.

Although the use of the subtitle at the end is the "easy way out," it quickly makes the point or moral about lending things to friends.

The Idiom

An idiom can provide an excellent starting point for a short story, since the idiom provides a character and an editorial position on that character. It also implies a narrative.

For our example let's use the idiom "fall guy." According to a recent guide, the etymology of "fall guy" is as follows: "By one account, the original fall guy was a wrestler who deliberately 'took a fall'—as commercial ('exhibition') wrestlers are still doing. Well, maybe. In British criminal slang 'fall' has meant 'be arrested' since the 1880s (it derives from a much earlier figurative sense, a descent from moral elevation, as in Adam's fall)." A fall guy, then, is someone paid or framed to "fall" for a crime; as Sam Spade explains

it to the Fat Man at the end of *The Maltese Falcon*, "He's not a fall guy unless he's a cinch to take the fall."[5] The modern fall guy takes the blame, or "carries the can," for some kind of misconduct or blunder.

The premise here is that our main character is going to be a scapegoat. Why he will be a scapegoat and how he becomes one is the thrust of the narrative of this particular short film. We have to choose a person and a situation. We do not necessarily have to choose a situation that will predestine the outcome or telegraph the fate of the main character to the audience. Perhaps the most critical task here is to create a situation that will make the outcome (that the character will become the fall guy) logical and that will create a character with whom we can empathize in spite of his or her plight.

Our story will be about an IRS bureaucrat who decides that he has had enough of saying no, that from now on he will say yes. He is the man in charge of income tax refunds. When the IRS communicates to the Treasury Department that it needs more money for refunds, the Treasury official replies that the Treasury had been about to ask the IRS for money (of course, the Internal Revenue Service essentially collects money for the Treasury). The official at the Treasury, also a bureaucrat, will not be able to report to his superior that he has the necessary money; the Treasury's mission is not accomplished. Will he be the fall guy for the IRS? The story can unfold in a few ways, but in any case the bureaucrat at the Treasury should be the fall guy. Clearly, the bureaucrat at the IRS is someone we all want to succeed.

This bureaucratic fantasy should focus on the fall guy at the Treasury, and we should on one level feel satisfaction at the fact: we can identify with and appreciate the prospect of greater refunds. In this story the fall guy's fate fulfills the audience's fantasy—to get a refund—and, consequently, the audience will accept not only the premise but also the fate of the fall guy.

The Anecdote

An anecdote, whether told by a friend or picked up in a newspaper, can be an excellent starting point for a screen story. The following is an example of such an anecdote.

> Desmond Tutu is the Anglican bishop of Johannesburg, South Africa. With a smile and some sly wit, he is able to make important points with a minimum of bitterness, which is perhaps why he was awarded the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize. He demonstrated this skill in a recent speech in New York City, where he stated, "When the missionaries first came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said 'Let us pray!' We closed our eyes. When we opened them, the tables had been turned: we had the Bible and they had the land!"[6]

This particular anecdote does not have much narrative or a main character, as did our earlier source material. It does, however contain a powerful irony: the subjugation, under the name of religion, of indigenous people. This is not a unique story, since it could easily be used to describe the early incursions of Western European powers into North and South America. In a sense, it is one of the major patterns of colonialism.

Our problem as writers is to use this powerful fact and metaphor and make it the spine of a short film story. Our approach can be realistic, dramatized, or animated. For the sake of providing an example of a different type from those used earlier, we will approach this anecdote with the goal of creating a story suitable for animation.

In order to focus on the concept of a moment of prayer turning into subjugation, we need to decide on a narrative and a character. We also need to make the point that at a certain time, blacks owned the land and were the power in South Africa. If possible, we should avoid the horrible cliché of traders giving gifts to the natives in exchange for property; to evoke Manhattan being purchased for a handful of trinkets can undermine the originality of our approach.

We suggest a story focusing on the meaning of prayer, in particular a specific prayer with meaning across different cultural groups and various historical periods. We can choose from prayers thanking the deity for the harvest, for the birth of a child, or for a death, or prayers asking or inviting the deity to provide. In our story approach, we will focus on prayers for a bountiful harvest. This will unify the story around prayer. It will also allow us to spotlight the land, the need to feed the local population, and the power structure in the area.

We will focus on a tribe, with a king and a shaman. The characters are black. In our story a king shows his son how to lead his people to a bountiful harvest. The king will speak of the need for rain, for peace with one's neighbors, and for sons and daughters to reap the harvest. Each scene focuses on an aspect of this prayer—for rain, for peace, for sons and daughters. Each scene ends with success, and in each scene the point should be made that the son in each scene is the king in the next. In this way, continuity over time suggests success and, implicitly, ownership. In the last three scenes white men are present, first as observers, then as traders. In the final scene there is a priest who leads the prayer for the harvest. The king closes his eyes as instructed, and when he opens his eyes, the men and women in the field are white; he and his children stand by and watch in wonder. Then a white man offers the king a tool. He does not accept it. The man offers it again. The priest sternly looks on. The king accepts the tool and is told where to work, and as he moves into the background, the foreground fills with

white priests and soldiers and their sons and daughters. The king and his people recede into the background, and our screen story ends.

The Fairy Tale

Fairy tales are often used to instill in children life lessons, particularly about codes of behavior. Every country has its fairy tales, generated throughout its history. Good collections of fairy tales include *Best Loved Folktales of the World*, *Spells of Enchantment*, and *Jewish Folk Tales*.[7]

For our example of a fairy tale we will use "The Pied Piper."[8] The elements of the story are these. A town has a problem with rats. It has tried to rid itself of the pests but has been unsuccessful. The Pied Piper suggests that for a price he will rid the town of its rats. Skeptically, the town elders agree. Playing his instrument, he leads the rats into deep water, where they all drown. He has succeeded where all others have failed.

He asks the town elders for payment, but they renege on their agreement and offer less. The Pied Piper refuses the reduced payment and warns that they will be sorry. He is dismissed.

The Piper begins to play, and all the children in the town follow him into the woods. The townspeople look on. He leads the children away from their families. The magic of his playing is successful, and the town never sees the children again.

The moral of this story is that we should honor our obligations. Subtextually, the story is also about a spellbinder, in this case a piper, whose power is so great that he can lead innocents to any fate. Parents who warn their children of strangers bearing gifts are often, at the back of their minds, thinking of the power of the Pied Piper and his hold over the imagination of children.

There are numerous strengths here—a narrative, a main character, and a purpose. Rather than create a literal treatment of the fairy tale, we can modernize the story. We can also tell it from a variety of points of view: the Pied Piper's, a child's, the parents', or the point of view of the official who reneges on his agreement. We can also alter the genders of the participants to give the story a stronger male-female dimension; if we wish, we can choose a time and a place for the story that would speak more strongly to a contemporary audience. The strength of the fairy tale, the reason that it has lasted over time, is the power of the moral of the tale. As long as it is the moral that centers the story, we will not lose the narrative power of the fairy tale.

EXERCISE 16

Anecdotes, fairy tales, jokes, newspapers, real-life experiences, all provide starting points for storytelling. The writer must use narrative tools to shape the story and make it suitable for the medium he or she has chosen. In order to give you practice at culling a story from a source and using narrative tools to shape it for the short film, we suggest the following exercise using the fairy tale:

1. Find a fairy tale or myth you like or identify with. Be sure to choose a true folk tale—not one by an author, such as Hans Christian Anderson or Oscar Wilde, but one that is credited to Anonymous. (The Grimm's collections and stories assembled by Andrew Lang are good. There are also many ethnic collections in bookstores and libraries.) Make several photocopies.
2. Read over your story carefully. Answer the following questions.
   a. Who is the main character of the story?
   b. What are the person's goals?
   c. Who is the antagonist of the story?
   d. Outline all the opposites you recognize in the story. This can include people, settings, actions, reactions.
   e. What is the plot of the story?
   f. How is the plot structured around the main character?
   g. How does the plot begin?
   h. Name the barriers to the character's achieving his or her goal.
   i. How does the plot end?
   j. What are the surprises in the plot of the story?
3. In order to gain preliminary experience with plot and structure, we suggest breaking down your story into three major sections (I, II, and III) and marking off each. Sections I, II, and III may each be as long as several paragraphs or as short as a sentence. Each section represents a change in the character's situation.

AN EXAMPLE: PERRAULT'S "LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD"[9]

Once upon a time there was a little village girl, the prettiest that had ever been seen. Her mother doted on her. Her grandmother was even fonder of her and made her a little red hood, which became her so well that she went by the name of Little Red Riding Hood.

One day her mother, who had just made and baked some cakes, said to her: "Go and see how your grandmother is, for I have been told that she is ill. Take her a cake and this little pot of butter."

Little Red Riding Hood set off at once for the house of her grandmother, who lived in another village.

On her way through a wood she met old Father Wolf. He would have very much liked to eat her but dared not do so on account of some woodcutters who were in the forest. He asked her where she was going.

The poor child, not knowing that it was dangerous to stop and listen to a wolf, said: "I am going to see my grandmother and am taking her a cake and a pot of butter my mother has sent to her."

"Does she live far away?" asked the Wolf.

"Oh yes," replied Little Red Riding Hood; "it is yonder by the mill, which you can see right below there, and it is the first house in the village."

"Well now," said the Wolf, "I think I shall go and see her too. I will, go by this path, and you by that path, and we will see who gets there first."

The Wolf set off running with all his might by the shorter road, and the little girl continued on her way by the longer road. As she went she amused herself by gathering nuts, running after butterflies, and making nosegays of the wild flowers she found.

The Wolf was not long in reaching the grandmother's house. He knocked.

Toc Toc.

"Who is there?"

"It is your little granddaughter Red Riding Hood," said the Wolf, disguising his voice, "and I bring you cake and a little pot of butter as a present from my mother."

The worthy grandmother was in bed, not being very well, and cried out to him: "Pull out the peg, and the latch will fall."

The Wolf drew out the peg, and the door flew open. Then he sprang upon the poor old lady and ate her up in less than no time, for he had been more than three days without food.

After that he shut the door lay down in the grandmother's bed, and waited for Little Red Riding Hood.

Presently she came and knocked.

Toc Toc.

"Who is there?"

Now Little Red Riding Hood on hearing the Wolf's gruff voice was at first frightened, but thinking that her grandmother had a bad cold, she replied: "It is your little granddaughter Red Riding Hood, and I bring you a cake and a little pot of butter from my mother."

Softening his voice, the Wolf called out to her: "Pull out the peg, and the latch will fall!"

Little Red Riding Hood drew out the peg, and the door flew open.

When he saw her enter the Wolf hid himself in the bed beneath the counterpane.

"Put the cake and the little pot of butter on the bin," he said, "and come up on the bed with me."

Little Red Riding Hood took off her clothes, but when she climbed up on the bed she was astonished to see how her grandmother looked in her nightgown.

"Grandmother dear!" she exclaimed, "What big arms you have!"

"The better to embrace you, my child!"

"Grandmother dear, what big legs you have!"

"The better to run with, my child!"

"Grandmother dear, what big ears you have!"

"The better to see with, my child!"

"Grandmother dear, what big teeth you have!"

"The better to eat you with!"

With those words the wicked Wolf leaped upon Little Red Riding Hood and gobbled her up.

DIVIDING THE STORY INTO SECTIONS

Section I would cover the first four paragraphs. Section II would begin with her meeting the Wolf and end with her arrival at her grandmother's cottage. Section III would include the action in the cottage: her undressing and climbing into bed with the Wolf. The section ends with her being eaten by the Wolf.

When we develop the outline and treatment of the proposed script, we will have to make decisions about what to include and what to exclude, but at this stage it will be more important for you to think about how to grip the contemporary audience. A literal treatment of the fairy tale won't speak to an audience your own age. It is important to understand what has gripped you so powerfully about the fairy tale. What about this story has a hold on you? The answer may have something to do with listening to your elders, or it may have something to do with the fear of the forest—fear of the unknown, fear of animals. Whatever it is, it is important for you to get in touch with that core idea.

A creative way to articulate that core drive is to begin to collect images of forests, children, animals, that may give you a clue. What you are simultaneously looking for is the tone of the story. For this story you might also look in children's books, where illustrations are often a supplement to the written story. Once you have found the images that contribute to your core notion about the fairy tale, you will be ready to proceed more deeply into writing a short screenplay based on the fairy tale.

For now the structure you've outlined and the tone you have decided on will help you use the answers to the questions about character and plot.