How to Write a Script Outline: the 8 Major Plot Points

Plot is THE driving force of your screenplay, so it’s essential that you spend time on your plotting skills when you’re writing a script outline.

You can create the most interesting character in the world, but without an equally interesting plot, the audience will not want to spend 90-120 minutes with that person.

For example, many people find Charlie Sheen’s current 2011 self-destructive spiral interesting to read and gossip about. But would they want to spend an hour and a half of their lives watching him swill alcohol, do drugs, and oogle women?

I think not.

But give Charlie boy a goal--perhaps to rejoin TWO & A HALF MEN, the successful sitcom he was kicked off of--while he overcomes his addiction to alcohol, drugs, & women…

…and that, people might watch because they’ll want to know if he can pull it off. Maybe not something they’ll pay $10 to see, but as a movie-of-the-week on TV…why not? (Although I suspect there are some film executives who think CHARLIE: 3D would be quite the blockbuster…)

Since you want to know how to write a script outline, let me clue you into the dirty little secret about plot:

With rare exception, all movies have the SAME structure.

Yes, you heard me correctly. A thriller like THE BOURNE IDENTITY has the same structure as a family comedy like TOY STORY.

No matter the story or its genre, each one has 8 plot points that you have to hit. And once you know these 8 plot points, writing a script outline and a full screenplay becomes infinitely easier because it’s no longer you vs 120 blank pages.
You’re writing towards a goal instead of blindly.

I strongly recommend that before you write one word of your screenplay, you spend time reflecting on these 8 major plot points. They will form the backbone of your script outline. Plus, it’ll save you time and heartache in the long run.

So without further ado, here they are:

**Your Script Outline — Plot Point #1: Opening & Closing Images**

The first image introduces your story to your audience, so make it a good one! Ideally, the first image is a visual representation of your entire story, especially its theme.

Your closing image is your last contact with your audience, so make it strong. A good closing image, like the spinning top in INCEPTION, can even change our interpretation of the entire ending.

The closing image from INCEPTION is of this dream “totem”

It’s probably best to decide what your opening and closing images are going to be after you’ve got a solid draft under your belt and have a clear understanding of the theme you’re trying to convey.

I must give credit where credit is due: I didn’t spend too much time thinking about opening and closing images until Blake Snyder mentioned them in his screenwriting book *Save the Cat* (which I highly recommend).
Your Script Outline — Plot Point #2: Inciting Incident

The inciting incident is that event that changes the course of your main character’s life. If the inciting incident didn’t occur, your main character would’ve taken another path…and you’d have an entirely different screenplay.

For a post dedicated to this special plot point, check out The Inciting Incident: Definition & Examples. And if you want to read a comprehensive, fluff-free guide dedicated exclusively to the inciting incident, click here!

Your Script Outline — Plot Point #3: First Act Break

The first act break marks the end of your set-up: you’ve introduced most, if not all, of the key characters.

We know about your main character, his goal and the obstacles he faces. He’s done his prep work, and now he’s ready to go.

In a lot of movie plots, the main character has to go on a journey in order to achieve his goal. Because of that, often times, the first act break involves a physical location change. For an example, read screenwriting tip #2 in Writing a Comedy Script: Tips from The Hangover.

Amateur screenplays are notorious for elaborate first acts that are simply too long. Although there are no hard and fast rules, this break usually occurs between pages 25-30 in your screenplay. Keep that in mind when you’re fleshing out your script outline.

Your Script Outline — Plot Point #4: the Midpoint

The midpoint, as its name implies, is the at the middle of your screenplay’s second act. It changes the entire direction of your story.

For example, in a “good vs evil” type of story, the good forces have experienced setback after setback. But at the midpoint, something happens that changes their fortunes for the better. For the first time, success seems like a possibility.

In a romance, comedy, or drama where people of different personalities are thrown together, the midpoint marks the moment where they stop seeing each other as enemies, usually by accomplishing a minor, but important, goal together.

To learn how to master the midpoint (and say good-bye to sagging middles), read this»
Your Script Outline — Plot Point #5: the Fork in the Road

The fork in the road is where your main character reaffirms or escalates commitment to his goal. It’s another plot point that I didn’t think much about until I read Viki King’s screenwriting book, *How to Write a Movie in 21 Days*.

According to King, this point of commitment happens around around page 60 of a screenplay. At first I was skeptical, but then I started looking for it—and lo and behold!–it was there, just as she said…usually clocking in 60 minutes into the movie.

I wouldn’t spend too much time on this plot point when writing your script outline, but because I’m personally interested in psychology and human motivation, I think it’s an interesting point to include (especially to reinforce theme).

You’ll often discover you already wrote in a point of a commitment in your screenplay, even if you didn’t consciously intend to do so.

Your Script Outline — Plot Point #6: All Is Lost

At this moment, your main character has experienced an extreme setback. He’s the farthest he can possibly be from his goal, and it seems impossible for him to accomplish it. This moment usually marks the end of Act II.

To learn about the three essentials to crafting the perfect “all is lost” moment, read this article, or, for a more detailed writing guide, read *Trough of Hell: How to Wrap Up the Middle of Your Story with Maximum Impact*.

Your Script Outline — Plot Point #7: the Climax

In the climax, your main character has gathered his resources (both internal and external). In this final showdown, he will test his mettle against the antagonistic forces that have thwarted him from achieving his goal.

If he has a tragic flaw, in the climax, he demonstrates that he has overcome it. All the lessons he learned during the second act will pay off in the climax.

Your Script Outline — Plot Point #8: the Resolution

Ah, we’re almost done!

If your screenplay has a happy ending, the resolution is the best part for your hero. He gets to enjoy the fruits of his labor. His world is in balance again.

My kind of screenplay resolution…
If your screenplay has, shall we say a more European ending, the resolution is either tragic or bittersweet for your hero. If tragic, perhaps he might not have accomplished his goal, but somehow he’s still in a better place than when he began his journey.

**Final thoughts on your script outline**

If you need help to create a script outline of your own, follow one of the suggestions, below:

**Read *Sizzling Story Outlines***. Learn a step-by-step, practical method to map out your entire story…and finish your rough draft without freaking out. Includes a technique that Stanford researchers have concluded can make you 60% more creative (on average). Click [here](#) to learn more.

**Download the Ultimate Story Structure Worksheet.** It contains questions and checklists designed to help you easily construct a script outline. Best of all, it’s absolutely free! Click on [this link](#) to access the worksheet.

**See the 8 essential plot points in action.** Check out [this article](#) to see examples of the 8 essential plot points from LORD OF THE RINGS: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING.

**Break out the index cards.** Watch a great movie and write down its plot points, one by one. If you’re pressed for time, use a list of plot points [from my archives](#).

Write each plot point onto an index card. Divide these index cards into columns, so that the last card in every column is either a major turning point or an act break.

If you do this regularly, you should develop an intuition for screenplay structure that will make plotting your own screenplays and writing a script outline ten times easier.

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What do you think? If you were writing a TV movie based on Charlie Sheen, what would your script outline look like?
Whiteboard Outline by Jo Guldi

Lush Island (of Sri Lanka) by Tallis Keeton