Composition means the ordering and linking of scenes. Like a composer choosing notes and chords, we shape progressions by selecting what to include, to exclude, to put before and after what. The task can be harrowing, for as we come to know our subject, every story possibility seems alive and squirming in a different direction. The disastrous temptation is to somehow include them all. Fortunately, to guide our efforts the art has evolved canons of composition: Unity and Variety, Pacing, Rhythm and Tempo, Social and Personal Progression, Symbolic and Ironic Ascension, and the Principle of Transition.

UNITY AND VARIETY

A story, even when expressing chaos, must be unified. This sentence, drawn from any plot, should be logical: “Because of the Inciting Incident, the Climax had to happen.” JAWS: “Because the shark killed a swimmer, the sheriff had to destroy the shark.” KRAMER VS. KRAMER: “Because Kramer’s wife left him and her child, only husband and wife could finally settle custody.” We should sense a causal lock between Inciting Incident and Story Climax. The Inciting Incident is the story’s most profound cause, and, therefore, the final effect, the Story Climax, should seem inevitable. The cement that binds them is the Spine, the protagonist’s deep desire to restore the balance of life.

Unity is critical, but not sufficient. Within this unity, we must induce as much variety as possible. CASABLANCA, for example, is
not only one of the most loved films of all time, it's also one of the most various. It's a brilliant Love Story, but more than half the film is Political Drama. Its excellent action sequences are counterpointed by urbane comedy. And it's the next thing to a Musical. Over a dozen tunes, strategically placed throughout, comment on or set up event, meaning, emotion.

Most of us are not capable of this much variety, nor would our stories warrant it, but we don't want to hit the same note over and over, so that every scene sounds like every other. Instead, we seek the tragic in the comic, the political in the personal, the personal driving the political, the extraordinary behind the usual, the trivial in the exalted. The key to varying a repetitious cadence is research. Superficial knowledge leads to a bland, monotonous telling. With authorial knowledge we can prepare a feast of pleasures. Or at the very least, add humor.

**PACING**

If we slowly turn the screw, increasing tension a little more, a little more, a little more, scene by scene by scene by scene, we wear the audience out long before the ending. It goes limp and has no energy to invest in the Story Climax. Because a story is a metaphor for life, we expect it to feel like life, to have the rhythm of life. This rhythm beats between two contradictory desires: On one hand, we desire serenity, harmony, peace, and relaxation, but too much of this day after day and we become bored to the point of ennui and need therapy. As a result, we also desire challenge, tension, danger, even fear. But too much of this day after day and again we end up in the rubber room. So the rhythm of life swings between these poles.

The rhythm of a typical day, for example: You wake up full of energy, meet your gaze in the morning mirror, and say: "Today I'm going to get something done. No, I mean it for a change. Today I'm definitely getting something done." Off you go to "get something done" through a minefield of missed appointments, unreturned calls, pointless errands, and unrelenting hassle until you take a welcome midday lunch with friends to chat, sip wine, relocate your
sanity, relax and gather your energies so you can go off to do battle with the demons of the afternoon, hoping to get done all the things you didn’t get done in the morning—more missed calls, more useless tasks, and never, never enough time.

Finally you hit the highway home, a road packed with cars with only one person in each. Do you car pool? No. After a hard day on the job, the last thing you want is to jump into a car with three other jerks from work. You escape into your car, snap on the radio, and get in the proper lane according to the music. If classical, you hug the right; if pop, down the middle of the road; if rock, head left. We moan about traffic but never do anything about it because, in truth, we secretly enjoy rush hour; drive-time is the only time most of us are ever alone. You relax, scratch what needs scratching, and add a primal scream to the music.

Home for a quick shower, then off into the night looking for fun. What’s fun? Amusement park rides that scare the life out of you, a film that makes you suffer emotions you’d never want in life, a singles bar and the humiliation of rejection. Weary, you fall into the rack and next dawn start this rhythm all over again.

This alternation between tension and relaxation is the pulse of living, the rhythm of days, even years. In some films it’s salient, in others subtle. TENDER MERCIES eases dramatic pressure gently up, then gently down, each cycle slowly increasing the overall tension to Climax; THE FUGITIVE sculpts tension to sharp peaks, then ebbs briefly before accelerating higher still. Each film speaks in its natural accent, but never in flat, repetitious, passive non-events, or in unrelenting, bludgeoning action. Whether Archplot, Miniplot, or Antiplot, all fine stories flux with the rhythm of life.

We use our act structure to start at a base of tension, then rise scene by sequence to the Climax of Act One. As we enter Act Two, we compose scenes that reduce this tension, switching to comedy, romance, a counterpointing mood that lowers the Act One intensity so that the audience can catch its breath and reach for more energy. We coach the audience to move like a long-distance runner who, rather than loping at a constant pace, speeds, slows, then speeds again, creating cycles that allow him to reach the limit of his reserves.
After retarding pace, we build the progressions of the following act until we top the previous Climax in intensity and meaning. Act by act, we tighten and release tension until the final Climax empties out the audience, leaving it emotionally exhausted but fulfilled. Then a brief Resolution scene to recuperate before going home.

It's just like sex. Masters of the bedroom arts pace their love-making. They begin by taking each other to a state of delicious tension short of—and we use the same word in both cases—climax, then tell a joke and shift positions before building each other to an even higher tension short of climax; then have a sandwich, watch TV, and gather energy to then reach greater and greater intensity, making love in cycles of rising tension until they finally climax simultaneously and the earth moves and they see colors. The gracious storyteller makes love to us. He knows we're capable of a tremendous release . . . if he paces us to it.

RHYTHM AND TEMPO

*Rhythm* is set by the length of scenes. How long are we in the same time and place? A typical two-hour feature plays forty to sixty scenes. This means, on average, a scene lasts two and a half minutes. But not every scene. Rather, for every one-minute scene there's a four-minute scene. For every thirty-second scene, a six-minute scene. In a properly formatted screenplay a page equals a minute of screen time. Therefore, if as you turn through your script, you discover a two-page scene followed by an eight-page scene, a seven-page scene, three-page scene, four-page, six-page, five-page, one-page, nine-page—in other words, if the average length of scene in your script is five pages, your story will have the pace of a postal worker on Valium.

Most directors' cameras drink up whatever is visually expressive in one location within two or three minutes. If a scene goes on longer, shots become redundant. The editor keeps coming back to the same establishing shot, same two-shot, close-up. When shots repeat, expressivity drains away; the film becomes visually dull and the eye loses interest and wanders from the screen. Do this enough and you'll lose the audience for good. The average scene length of
two to three minutes is a reaction to the nature of cinema and the audience's hunger for a stream of expressive moments.

When we study the many exceptions to this principle, they only prove the point. TWELVE ANGRY MEN takes place over two days in a jury room. In essence, it consists of two fifty-minute scenes in one location, with a brief break for a night's sleep. But because it's based on a play, director Sidney Lumet could take advantage of its French Scenes.

In the Neoclassical period (1750–1850) the French theatre strictly obeyed the Unities: A set of conventions that restricted a play's performance to one basic action or plot, taking place in one location within the time it takes to perform. But the French realized that within this unity of time and space the entrance or exit of principal characters radically changes the dynamics of relationships and in effect creates a new scene. For example, in a garden setting young lovers play a scene together, then her mother discovers them. Her entrance so alters character relationships that it effects a new scene. This trio has a scene, then the young man exits. His exit so rearranges the relationship between mother and daughter that masks fall and a new scene begins.

Understanding the principle of French scenes, Lumet broke the jury room into sets within the set—the drinking fountain, cloakroom, window, one end of the table versus the other. Within these sublocations, he staged French Scenes: First jury members #1 and #2, then #2 exits while #5 and #7 enter, CUT TO #6 alone, CUT TO all twelve, CUT TO five of them off in a corner, and so on. The over eighty French Scenes in TWELVE ANGRY MEN build an exciting rhythm.

MY DINNER WITH ANDRE is even more contained: a two-hour film about a two-hour dinner with two characters and therefore no French Scenes. Yet the film pulses with rhythm because it's paced with scenes created, as in literature, by painting word pictures on the imagination of the listener: the adventure in the Polish forest, Andre's friends burying him alive in a bizarre ritual, the synchronistic phenomenon he encounters in his office. These erudite recounts wrap an Education Plot around an Education Plot. As Andre (Andre Gregory) relates his quixotic adventure toward
spiritual development, he so cants his friend’s view of life that Wally (Wallace Shawn) leaves the restaurant a changed man.

*Tempo* is the level of activity within a scene via dialogue, action, or a combination. For example, lovers talking quietly from pillow to pillow may have low tempo; an argument in a courtroom, high tempo. A character staring out a window coming to a vital life decision may have low tempo; a riot, high tempo.

In a well-told story, the progression of scenes and sequences accelerates pace. As we head toward act climaxes, we take advantage of *rhythm* and *tempo* to progressively shorten scenes while the activity in them becomes more and more brisk. Like music and dance, story is kinetic. We want to use cinema’s sensory power to hurl the audience toward act climaxes because scenes of major reversal are, in fact, generally long, slow, and tense. “Climactic” doesn’t mean short and explosive; it means profound change. Such scenes are not to be skimmed over. So we open them and let them breathe; we retard pace while the audience holds its breath, wondering what’s going to happen next.

Again, the Law of Diminishing Returns applies: The more often we pause, the less effective a pause is. If the scenes before a major Climax are long and slow, the big scene in which we want the tension to hold falls flat. Because we’ve dragged the energies of the audience through sluggish scenes of minor importance, events of great moment are greeted with a shrug. Instead, we must “earn the pause” by telescoping *rhythm* while spiraling *tempo*, so that when the Climax arrives, we can put the brakes on, stretch the playing time, and the tension holds.

The problem with this design, of course, is that it’s a cliché. D. W. Griffith mastered it. Filmmakers of the Silent Era knew that something as trivial as another chase to collar the bad guys can feel tremendous if pace is excited by making scenes ever shorter and *tempo* ever hasty. But techniques don’t become clichés unless they have something important going for them in the first place. We, therefore, cannot, out of ignorance or arrogance, ignore the principle. If we lengthen and slow scenes prior to a major reversal, we cripple our Climax.
Pace begins in the screenplay. Cliché or not, we must control *rhythm* and *tempo*. It needn't be a symmetrical swelling of activity and shaving of scene lengths, but progressions must be shaped. For if we don't, the film editor will. And if to trim our sloppy work he cuts some of our favorite moments, we have no one to blame but ourselves. We're screenwriters, not refugees from the novel. Cinema is a unique art form. The screenwriter must master the aesthetics of motion pictures and create a screenplay that prepares the way for the artists who follow.

**EXPRESSING 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 characters' lives, and places them at greater and greater jeopardy. How are we to express this? How will the audience sense the progressions? There are four primary techniques.

**SOCIAL PROGRESSION**

*Widen the impact of character actions into society.*

Let your story begin intimately, involving only a few principal characters. But as the telling moves forward, allow their actions to ramify outward into the world around them, touching and changing the lives of more and more people. Not all at once. Rather, spread the effect gradually through the progressions.

**LONE STAR:** Two men searching for spent shells on a deserted rifle range in Texas uncover the skeletal remains of a sheriff who vanished decades before. Evidence at the scene leads the current sheriff to suspect that his own father may have committed the murder. As he investigates, the story spreads outward into society and back through time, tracing a pattern of corruption and injustice that has touched and changed the lives of three generations of Texan-, Mexican- and African Americans—virtually every citizen in Rio County.
MEN IN BLACK: A chance encounter between a farmer and a fugitive alien searching for a rare gem slowly ramifies outward to jeopardize all of creation.

This principle of starting with intimate problems that ramify outward into the world to build powerful progressions explains why certain professions are overrepresented in the roles of protagonists. This is why we tend to tell stories about lawyers, doctors, warriors, politicians, scientists—people so positioned in society by profession that if something goes haywire in their private lives, the writer can expand the action into society.

Imagine a story that begins like this: The President of the United States gets up one morning to shave and as he stares in the mirror, he hallucinates about imaginary enemies around the globe. He tells no one, but soon his wife realizes he’s gone mad. His close associates too. They gather and decide that since he has only six months left in office, why spoil things now? They’ll cover up for him. But we know he has “his finger on the button” and a madman in this position could turn our troubled world into universal hell.

PERSONAL PROGRESSION

Drive actions deeply into the intimate relationships and inner lives of the characters.

If the logic of your setting doesn’t allow you to go wide, then you must go deep. Start with a personal or inner conflict that demands balancing, yet seems relatively solvable. Then, as the work progresses, hammer the story downward—emotionally, psychologically, physically, morally—to the dark secrets, the unspoken truths that hide behind a public mask.

ORDINARY PEOPLE is confined to the family, a friend, and a doctor. From a tension between mother and son that seems solvable with communication and love, it descends to grievous pain. As the father slowly comes to realize he must choose between the sanity of his son and the unity of his family, the story drives the child to the brink of suicide, the mother to reveal
her hatred of her own child, and the husband to lose a wife he deeply loves.

CHINATOWN is an elegant design that combines both techniques, reaching simultaneously wide and deep. A private eye is hired to investigate a man for adultery. Then, like an oil slick, the story moves outward in an ever-widening circle that engulfs city hall, millionaire conspirators, farmers of the San Fernando Valley, until it contaminates all the citizens of Los Angeles. At the same time it plunges inward. Gittes is under constant assault: kicks to the groin, blows to the head, his nose split open. Mulwray is killed, incest exposed between father and daughter until the protagonist’s tragic past repeats to trigger the death of Evelyn Mulwray and throw an innocent child into the hands of an insane father/grandfather.

SYMBOLIC ASCENSION

Build the symbolic charge of the story’s imagery from the particular to the universal, the specific to the archetypal.

A good story well told fosters a good film. But a good story well told with the added power of subliminal symbolism lifts the telling to the next level of expressivity, and the payoff may be a great film. Symbolism is very compelling. Like images in our dreams, it invades the unconscious mind and touches us deeply—as long as we’re unaware of its presence. If, in a heavy-handed way, we label images as “symbolic,” their effect is destroyed. But if they are slipped quietly, gradually, and unassumingly into the telling, they move us profoundly.

Symbolic progression works in this way: start with actions, locations, and roles that represent only themselves. But as the story progresses, choose images that gather greater and greater meaning, until by the end of the telling characters, settings, and events stand for universal ideas.

THE DEER HUNTER introduces steel workers in Pennsylvania who like to hunt, drink beer, and carouse. They’re as ordinary as
the town they live in. But as events progress, sets, roles, and actions become more and more symbolically charged, building from the tiger cages in Vietnam to the highly symbolic scenes in a Saigon casino where men play Russian Roulette for money, culminating in a Crisis at the top of a mountain. The protagonist, Michael (Robert De Niro) progresses from factory worker to warrior to "The Hunter," the man who kills.

The film's Controlling Idea is: We save our own humanity when we stop killing other living beings. If the hunter spills enough blood, sooner or later he runs out of targets and turns the gun on himself. He either literally kills himself, as does Nick (Christopher Walken), or more likely, he kills himself in the sense that he stops feeling anything and falls dead inside. The Crisis sends Michael in his hunter's garb, armed with a weapon, to a mountaintop. There, on a precipice, the prey, a magnificent elk, comes out of the mist. An archetypal image: hunter and prey at the top of a mountain. Why the top of a mountain? Because tops of mountains are places where "great things happen." Moses is given the Ten Commandments, not in his kitchen, but at the top of a mountain.

THE TERMINATOR takes symbolic progression in a different direction, not up the mountain but into the maze. Opening with step-down imagery of commonplace people in commonplace settings, it tells the story of Sarah Connor, a fast-food waitress in Los Angeles. Suddenly, the Terminator and Reese explode into the present from the year 2029, and pursue Sarah through the streets of L.A., one trying to kill her, the other to save her.

We learn that in the future robots become self-aware and try to stamp out the human race that created them. They nearly succeed when the remnants of humanity are led in a revolt by the charismatic John Connor. He turns the tide against the robots and all but stamps them out, when the robots invent a time machine and send into the past an assassin to kill Connor's mother before he's born, thus eliminating Connor from existence and winning the war for the robots. Connor captures the time machine, discovers the plan, and sends back his lieutenant, Reese, to kill this monster before it kills his mother.
The streets of Los Angeles conspire into the ancient archetype of the labyrinth. Freeways, alleyways, cul-de-sacs, and corridors of buildings twist and turn the characters until they work their way down to its tangled heart. There Sarah, like Theseus at the center of the Minoan maze battling the half-man/half-bull Minotaur, confronts the half-man/half-robot Terminator. If she vanquishes the demon, she will, like the Virgin Mary, give birth to the savior of humanity, John Connor (JC), and raise him to lead humanity to deliverance in the coming holocaust. Sarah progresses from waitress to goddess, and the film's symbolic progression lifts it above almost all others in its genre.

IRONIC ASCENSION

Turn progression on irony.

Irony is the subtest manifestation of story pleasure, that delicious sense of “Ah, life is just like that.” It sees life in duality; it plays with our paradoxical existence, aware of the bottomless chasm between what seems and what is. Verbal irony is found in the discrepancy between words and their meanings—a primary source of jokes. But in story, irony plays between actions and results—the primary source of story energy, between appearance and reality—the primary source of truth and emotion.

An ironic sensibility is a precious asset, a razor to cut to the truth, but it can’t be used directly. It does us no good to have a character wander the story saying, “How ironic!” Like symbolism, to point at irony destroys it. Irony must be coolly, casually released with a seemingly innocent unawareness of the effect it’s creating and a faith that the audience will get it. Because irony is by nature slippery, it defies a hard and fast definition, and is best explained by example. Below are six ironic story patterns with an example for each.

1. He gets at last what he's always wanted . . . but too late to have it.

OTHello: The Moor finally gets what he always wanted,
a wife who is true to him and who never betrayed him with another man ... but when he finds that out, it's too late, because he just killed her.

2. He's pushed further and further from his goal ... only to discover that in fact he's been led right to it.

RUTHLESS PEOPLE: The greedy businessman, Sam (Danny Devito), steals an idea from Sandy (Helen Slater) and makes a fortune without paying her a cent of royalties. Sandy's husband, Ken (Judge Reinhold), decides to kidnap Sam's wife, Barbara (Bette Midler), and ransom her for the two million dollars he feels his wife is owed. But when Ken abducts Barbara, he doesn't know that Sam is coming home to murder his shrewish and overweight wife. Ken calls Sam demanding millions, but the gleeful Sam puts him off. Ken keeps lowering the price until at ten thousand dollars Sam says, “Oh, why don’t you just kill her and get it over with.”

Meanwhile, Barbara, held captive in the Kessler basement, has turned her prison into a spa. She's following all the exercise programs on TV, Sandy's an excellent natural foods cook, and as a result, Barbara loses more weight than she ever did at the best fat farms in America. Consequently, she loves her kidnappers. And when they tell her they'll have to let her go because her husband won't pay the ransom, she turns to them and says, “I'll get the money for ya.” That was Act One.

3. He throws away what he later finds is indispensable to his happiness.

MOULIN ROUGE: The crippled artist Toulouse-Lautrec (Jose Ferrer) falls in love with the beautiful Suzanne (Myriamme Hayem) but can't bring himself to tell her this. She accompanies him as a friend around Paris. Lautrec becomes convinced that the only reason she spends time with him is that it gives her the opportunity to meet handsome men. In a drunken rage he accuses her of using him and storms out of her life.
Some time later he receives a letter from Suzanne: “Dear Toulouse, I always hoped that some day you might love me. Now I realize that you never will. So I have taken the offer of another man. I don’t love him, but he’s kind and as you know my situation is desperate. Adieu.” Lautrec frantically searches for her, but indeed she’s left to marry another. So he drinks himself to death.

4. **To reach a goal he unwittingly takes the precise steps necessary to lead him away.**

**TOOTSIE:** Michael (Dustin Hoffman), an out-of-work actor whose perfectionism has alienated every producer in New York, impersonates a woman and is cast in a soap opera. On the set he meets and falls in love with Julie (Jessica Lange). But he’s such a brilliant actor, her father (Charles Durning) wants to marry him while Julie suspects he’s a lesbian.

5. **The action he takes to destroy something becomes exactly what are needed to be destroyed by it.**

**RAIN:** The religious bigot Reverend Davidson (Walter Huston) battles to save the soul of the prostitute Sadie Thompson (Joan Crawford), but falls into lust for her, rapes her, then kills himself in shame.

6. **He 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.**

**BRINGING UP BABY:** When the madcap socialite Susan (Katharine Hepburn) inadvertently steals the car of the naive and repressed paleontologist Dr. David Huxley (Cary Grant), she likes what she sees and sticks to him like glue. He tries everything possible to get rid of her, but she foils his lunatic evasions, chiefly by stealing his bone, the “intercostal clavicle” of a brontosaurus. (If there were such a thing as an “intercostal clavicle,” it would belong to a creature with its head attached well below its shoulders.)
Susan's persistence pays off as she transforms David from fossilized child to life-embracing adult.

The key to ironic progression is certainty and precision. Like CHINATOWN, SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS, and many other superb films, these are stories of protagonists who feel they know for certain what they must do and have a precise plan how to do it. They think life is A, B, C, D, E. That's just when life likes to turn you around, kick you in the butt, and grin: "Not today, my friend. Today it's E, D, C, B, A. Sorry."

**PRINCIPLE OF TRANSITION**

A story without a sense of progression tends to stumble from one scene to the next. It has little continuity because nothing links its events. As we design cycles of rising action, we must at the same time transition the audience smoothly through them. Between two scenes, therefore, we need a third element, the link that joins the tail of Scene A with the head of Scene B. Generally, we find this third element in one of two places: what the scenes have in common or what they have in opposition.

**The third element is the hinge for a transition: something held in common by two scenes or counterpointed between them.**

Examples:

1. *A characterization trait.* In common: cut from a bratty child to a childish adult. In opposition: cut from awkward protagonist to elegant antagonist.
2. *An action.* In common: From the foreplay of lovemaking to savoring the afterglow. In opposition: From chatter to cold silence.
3. *An object.* In common: From greenhouse interior to woodland exterior. In opposition: From the Congo to Antarctica.
4. A word. In common: A phrase repeated from scene to scene. In opposition: From compliment to curse.


6. A sound. In common: From waves lapping a shore to the rise and fall of a sleeper’s breath. In opposition: From silk caressing skin to the grinding of gears.

7. An idea. In common: From a child’s birth to an overture. In opposition: From a painter’s empty canvas to an old man dying.

After a century of filmmaking, transition clichés abound. Yet we can't put down the task. An imaginative study of almost any two scenes will find a link.