A story is a design in five parts: The *Inciting Incident*, the first major event of the telling, is the primary cause for all that follows, putting into motion the other four elements—*Progressive Complications, Crisis, Climax, Resolution*. To understand how the Inciting Incident enters into and functions within the work, let's step back to take a more comprehensive look at *setting*, the physical and social world in which it occurs.

**THE WORLD OF THE STORY**

We've defined *setting* in terms of period, duration, location, and level of conflict. These four dimensions frame the story's world, but to inspire the multitude of creative choices you need to tell an original, cliché-free story, and you must fill that frame with a depth and breadth of detail. Below is a list of general questions we ask of all stories. Beyond these, each work inspires a unique list of its own, driven by the writer's thirst for insight.

*How do my characters make a living?* We spend a third or more of our lives at work, yet rarely see scenes of people doing their jobs. The reason is simple: Most work is boring. Perhaps not to the person doing the work, but boring to watch. As any lawyer, cop, or doctor knows, the vast majority of their time is spent in routine duties, reports, and meetings that change little or nothing—the epitome of expectation meeting result. That's why in the professional genres—*Courtroom, Crime, Medical*—we focus on only those moments when
work causes more problems than it solves. Nonetheless, to get inside a character, we must question all aspects of their twenty-four-hour day. Not only work, but how do they play? Pray? Make love?

What are the politics of my world? Not necessarily politics in terms of right-wing/left-wing, Republican/Democrat, but in the true sense of the word: power. Politics is the name we give to the orchestration of power in any society. Whenever human beings gather to do anything, there’s always an uneven distribution of power. In corporations, hospitals, religions, government agencies, and the like, someone at the top has great power, people at the bottom have little or none, those in between have some. How does a worker gain power or lose it? No matter how we try to level inequalities, applying egalitarian theories of all kinds, human societies are stubbornly and inherently pyramidal in their arrangement of power. In other words, politics.

Even when writing about a household, question its politics, for like any other social structure, a family is political. Is it a patriarchal home where Dad has the clout, but when he leaves the house, it transfers to Mom, then when she’s out, to the oldest child? Or is it a matriarchal home, where Mom runs things? Or a contemporary family in which the kid is tyrannizing his parents?

Love relationships are political. An old Gypsy expression goes: "He who confesses first loses." The first person to say "I love you" has lost because the other, upon hearing it, immediately smiles a knowing smile, realizing that he’s the one loved, so he now controls the relationship. If you’re lucky, those three little words will be said in unison over candlelight. Or, if very, very lucky, they won’t need to be said... they’ll be done.

What are the rituals of my world? In all corners of the world life is bound up in ritual. This is a ritual, is it not? I’ve written a book and you’re reading it. In another time and place we might sit under a tree or take a walk, like Socrates and his students. We create a ritual for every activity, not only for public ceremony but for our very private rites. Heaven help the person who rearranges my organization of toiletries around the bathroom basin.

How do your characters take meals? Eating is a different ritual everywhere in the world. Americans, for example, according to a
recent survey, now eat 75 percent of all their meals in restaurants. If your characters eat at home, is it an old-fashioned family that dresses for dinner at a certain hour, or a contemporary one that feeds from an open refrigerator?

What are the values in my world? What do my characters consider good? Evil? What do they see as right? Wrong? What are my society’s laws? Realize that good/evil, right/wrong, and legal/illegal don’t necessarily have anything to do with one another. What do my characters believe is worth living for? Foolish to pursue? What would they give their lives for?

What is the genre or combination of genres? With what conventions? As with setting, genres surround the writer with creative limitations that must be kept or brilliantly altered.

What are the biographies of my characters? From the day they were born to the opening scene, how has life shaped them?

What is the Backstory? This is an oft-misunderstood term. It doesn’t mean life history or biography. Backstory is the set of significant events that occurred in the characters’ past that the writer can use to build his story’s progressions. Exactly how we use Backstory to tell story will be discussed later, but for the moment note that we do not bring characters out of a void. We landscape character biographies, planting them with events that become a garden we’ll harvest again and again.

What is my cast design? Nothing in a work of art is there by accident. Ideas may come spontaneously, but we must weave them consciously and creatively into the whole. We cannot allow any character who comes to mind to stumble into the story and play a part. Each role must fit a purpose, and the first principle of cast design is polarization. Between the various roles we devise a network of contrasting or contradictory attitudes.

If the ideal cast sat down for dinner and something happened, whether as trivial as spilled wine or as important as a divorce announcement, from each and every character would come a separate and distinctively different reaction. No two would react the same because no two share the same attitude toward anything. Each is an individual with a character-specific
view of life, and the disparate reaction of each contrasts with all others.

If two characters in your cast share the same attitude and react in kind to whatever occurs, you must either collapse the two into one, or expel one from the story. When characters react the same, you minimize opportunities for conflict. Instead, the writer's strategy must be to maximize these opportunities.

Imagine this cast: father, mother, daughter, and a son named Jeffrey. This family lives in Iowa. As they sit down for dinner, Jeffrey turns to them and says: "Mom, Dad, Sis, I've come to a big decision. I have an airline ticket and tomorrow I'm leaving for Hollywood to pursue a career as an art director in the movies." And all three respond: "Oh, what a wonderful idea! Isn't that great? Jeff's going off to Hollywood!" And they toast him with their glasses of milk.

**CUT TO:** Jeff's room, where they help him pack while admiring his pictures on the wall, reflecting nostalgically on his days in art school, complimenting his talent, predicting success.

**CUT TO:** The airport as the family puts Jeff on the plane, tears in their eyes, embracing him: "Write when you get work, Jeff."

Suppose, instead, Jeffrey sits down for dinner, delivers his declaration, and suddenly Dad's fist POUNDS the table: "What the hell are you talking about, Jeff? You're not going off to Hollyweird to become some art director... whatever an art director is. No, you're staying right here in Davenport. Because, Jeff, as you know, I have never done anything for myself. Not in my entire life. It's all for you, Jeff, for you! Granted, I'm the king of plumbing supplies in Iowa... but someday, son, you'll be emperor of plumbing supplies all over the Midwest and I won't hear another word of this nonsense. End of discussion."

**CUT TO:** Jeff sulking in his room. His mother slips in whispering: "Don't you listen to him. Go off to Hollywood, become an art director... whatever that is. Do they win Oscars for that, Jeff?" "Yes, Mom, they do," Jeff says. "Good! Go off to Hollywood and win me an Oscar and prove that bastard wrong. And you can do it, Jeff. Because you've got talent. I know you've got talent. You got
that from my side of the family. I used to have talent too, but I gave it all up when I married your father, and I’ve regretted it ever since. For God’s sake, Jeff, don’t sit here in Davenport. Hell, this town was named after a sofa. No, go off to Hollywood and make me proud.”

**CUT TO:** Jeff packing. His sister comes in, shocked, “Jeff! What are you doing? Packing? Leaving me alone? With those two? You know how they are. They’ll eat me alive. If you go off to Hollywood, I’ll end up in the plumbing supply business!” Pulling his stuff out of the suitcase: “If you wanna be an artist, you can be an artist anywhere. A sunset’s a sunset. A landscape’s a landscape. What the hell difference does it make? And someday you’ll have success. I know you will. I’ve seen paintings just like yours . . . in Sears. Don’t leave, Jeff! I’ll die!”

Whether or not Jeff goes off to Hollywood, the polarized cast gives the writer something we all desperately need: scenes.

**AUTHORSHIP**

When research of setting reaches the saturation point, something miraculous happens. Your story takes on a unique atmosphere, a personality that sets it apart from every other story ever told, no matter how many millions there have been through time. It’s an amazing phenomenon: Human beings have told one another stories since they sat around the fire in caves, and every time the storyteller uses the art in its fullest, his story, like a portrait by a master painter, becomes one of a kind.

Like the stories you’re striving to tell, you want to be one of a kind, recognized and respected as an original. In your quest, consider these three words: “author,” “authority,” “authenticity.”

First, “author.” “Author” is a title we easily give novelists and playwrights, rarely screenwriters. But in the strict sense of “originator,” the screenwriter, as creator of setting, characters, and story, is an author. For the test of authorship is knowledge. A true author, no matter the medium, is an artist with godlike knowledge of his subject, and the proof of his authorship is that his pages smack of
authority. What a rare pleasure it is to open a screenplay and immediately surrender to the work, giving over emotion and concentration because there is something ineffable between and under the lines that says: "This writer knows. I'm in the hands of an authority." And the effect of writing with authority is authenticity.

Two principles control the emotional involvement of an audience. First, empathy: identification with the protagonist that draws us into the story, vicariously rooting for our own desires in life. Second, authenticity: We must believe, or as Samuel Taylor Coleridge suggested, we must willingly suspend our disbelief. Once involved, the writer must keep us involved to FADE OUT. To do so, he must convince us that the world of his story is authentic. We know that storytelling is a ritual surrounding a metaphor for life. To enjoy this ceremony in the dark we react to stories as if they're real. We suspend our cynicism and believe in the tale as long as we find it authentic. The moment it lacks credibility, empathy dissolves and we feel nothing.

Authenticity, however, does not mean actuality. Giving a story a contemporary milieu is no guarantee of authenticity; authenticity means an internally consistent world, true to itself in scope, depth, and detail. As Aristotle tells us: "For the purposes of [story] a convincing impossibility is preferable to an unconvincing possibility." We can all list films that had us moaning: "I don't buy it. People aren't like that. Makes no sense. That's not how things happen."

Authenticity has nothing to do with so-called reality. A story set in a world that could never exist could be absolutely authentic. Story arts do not distinguish between reality and the various nonrealities of fantasy, dream, and ideality. The creative intelligence of the writer merges all these into a unique yet convincing fictional reality.

ALIEN: In the opening sequence the crew of an interstellar cargo ship awakes from its stasis chambers and gathers at the mess table. Dressed in work shirts and dungarees, they drink coffee and smoke cigarettes. On the table a toy bird bobs in a glass. Elsewhere, little collectibles of life clutter the living spaces. Plastic bugs hang from the ceiling, pinups and family photos are taped to the bulkhead. The crew talks—not about work or getting home—but about
money. Is this unscheduled stop in their contract? Will the company pay bonuses for this extra duty?

Have you ever ridden in the cab of an eighteen-wheeler? How are they decorated? With the little collectibles of life: a plastic saint on the dashboard, blue ribbons won at a county fair, family photos, magazine clippings. Teamsters spend more time in their trucks than at home, so they take pieces of home on the road. And when they take a break, what's the first topic of talk? Money—golden time, overtime, is this in our contract? Understanding this psychology, screenwriter Dan O'Bannon recreated it in subtle details, so as that the scene played, the audience surrendered, thinking: "Wonderful! They're not spacemen like Buck Rogers or Flash Gordon. They're truck drivers."

In the next sequence, as Kane (John Hurt) investigates an alien growth, something springs out and smashes through the helmet of his space suit. Like a huge crab, the creature covers Kane's face, its legs locked around his head. What's worse, it's forced a tube down his throat and into his belly, putting him in a coma. Science Officer Ash (Ian Holm) realizes he can't pry the creature loose without ripping Kane's face apart, so he decides to release the creature's grip by severing its legs one at a time.

But as Ash applies a laser saw to the first leg, the flesh splits and out spits a viscous substance; a blistering "acid blood" that dissolves steel like sugar and eats a hole through the floor as big as a watermelon. The crew rushes to the deck below and looks up to see the acid eating through the ceiling, then burning a hole just as big through that floor. They rush down another deck and it's eating through that ceiling and floor until three decks down the acid finally peters out. At this point, one thought passed through the audience: "These people are in deep shit."

In other words, O'Bannon researched his alien. He asked himself, "What is the biology of my beast? How does it evolve? Feed? Grow? Reproduce? Does it have any weaknesses? What are its strengths?" Imagine the list of attributes O'Bannon must have concocted before seizing on "acid blood." Imagine the many sources he may have explored. Perhaps he did an intense study of earth-
bound parasitical insects, or remembered the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf in which the blood of Grendel the water monster burns through the hero’s shield, or it came to him in a nightmare. Whether through investigation, imagination, or memory, O’Bannon’s alien is a stunning creation.

All the artists making ALIEN—writer, director, designers, actors—worked to the limit of their talents to create an authentic world. They knew that believability is the key to terror. Indeed, if the audience is to feel any emotion, it must believe. For when a film’s emotional load becomes too sad, too horrifying, even too funny, how do we try to escape? We say to ourselves: “It’s only a movie.” We deny its authenticity. But if the film’s of quality, the second we glance back at the screen, we’re grabbed by the throat and pulled right back into those emotions. We won’t escape until the film lets us out, which is what we paid our money for in the first place.

Authenticity depends on the “telling detail.” When we use a few selected details, the audience’s imagination supplies the rest, completing a credible whole. On the other hand, if the writer and director try too hard to be “real”—especially with sex and violence—the audience reaction is: “That’s not really real.” or “My God, that’s so real,” or “They’re not really fucking.” or “My God, they’re really fucking.” In either case, credibility shatters as the audience is yanked out of the story to notice the filmmaker’s technique. An audience believes as long as we don’t give them reason to doubt.

Beyond physical and social detail, we must also create emotional authenticity. Authorial research must pay off in believable character behavior. Beyond behavioral credibility, the story itself must persuade. From event to event, cause and effect must be convincing, logical. The art of story design lies in the fine adjustment of things both usual and unusual to things universal and archetypal. The writer whose knowledge of subject has taught him exactly what to stress and expand versus what to lay down quietly and subtly will stand out from the thousands of others who always hit the same note.

Originality lies in the struggle for authenticity, not eccentricity. A personal style, in other words, cannot be achieved self-consciously.
Rather, when your authorial knowledge of setting and character meets your personality, the choices you make and the arrangements you create out of this mass of material are unique to you. Your work becomes what you are, an original.

Compare a Waldo Salt story (MIDNIGHT COWBOY, SERPICO) with an Alvin Sargent story (DOMINICK AND EUGENE, ORDINARY PEOPLE): one hard-edged, the other tender, one elliptical, the other linear, one ironic, the other compassionate. The unique story styles of each is the natural and spontaneous effect of an author mastering his subject in the never-ending battle against clichés.

THE INCITING INCIDENT

Starting from any Premise at any point in the story’s chronology, our research feeds the invention of events, the events redirect research. We do not, in other words, necessarily design a story by beginning with its first major event. But at some point as you create your universe, you’ll face these questions: How do I set my story into action? Where do I place this crucial event?

When an Inciting Incident occurs it must be a dynamic, fully developed event, not something static or vague. This, for example, is not an Inciting Incident: A college dropout lives off-campus near New York University. She wakes one morning and says: “I’m bored with my life. I think I’ll move to Los Angeles.” She packs her VW and motors west, but her change of address changes nothing of value in her life. She’s merely exporting her apathy from New York to California.

If, on the other hand, we notice that she’s created an ingenious kitchen wallpaper from hundreds of parking tickets, then a sudden POUNDING on the door brings the police, brandishing a felony warrant for ten thousand dollars in unpaid citations, and she flees down the fire escape, heading West—this could be an Inciting Incident. It has done what an Inciting Incident must do.

The INCITING INCIDENT radically upsets the balance of forces in the protagonist’s life.
As a story begins, the protagonist is living a life that’s more or less in balance. He has successes and failures, ups and downs. Who doesn’t? But life is in relative control. Then, perhaps suddenly but in any case decisively, an event occurs that radically upsets its balance, swinging the value-charge of the protagonist’s reality either to the negative or to the positive.

Negative: Our dropout reaches L.A., but she balks at taking a normal job when she’s asked for her social security number. Fearful that in a computerized world the Manhattan police will track her down through the Internal Revenue Service, what does she do? Go underground? Sell drugs? Turn to prostitution?

Positive: Perhaps the knock at the door is an heir hunter with news of a million-dollar fortune left by an anonymous relative. Suddenly rich, she’s under terrible pressure. With no more excuses for failure, she has a heart-thumping fear of screwing up this dream come true.

In most cases, the Inciting Incident is a single event that either happens directly to the protagonist or is caused by the protagonist. Consequently, he’s immediately aware that life is out of balance for better or worse. When lovers first meet, this face-to-face event turns life, for the moment, to the positive. When Jeffrey abandons the security of his Davenport family for Hollywood, he knowingly puts himself at risk.

Occasionally, an Inciting Incident needs two events: a setup and a payoff. JAWS: Setup, a shark eats a swimmer and her body
washes onto the beach. Payoff, the sheriff (Roy Scheider) discovers the corpse. If the logic of an Inciting Incident requires a setup, the writer cannot delay the payoff—at least not for very long—and keep the protagonist ignorant of the fact that his life is out of balance. Imagine JAWS with this design: Shark eats girl, followed by sheriff goes bowling, gives out parking tickets, makes love to his wife, goes to PTA meeting, visits his sick mother... while the corpse rots on the beach. A story is not a sandwich of episodic slices of life between two halves of an Inciting Incident.

Consider the unfortunate design of THE RIVER: The film opens with the first half of an Inciting Incident: a businessman, Joe Wade (Scott Glenn) decides to build a dam across a river, knowing he'll flood five farms in the process. One of these belongs to Tom and Mae Garvey (Mel Gibson and Sissy Spacek). No one, however, tells Tom or Mae. So for the next hundred minutes we watch: Tom plays baseball, Tom and Mae struggle to make the farm turn a profit, Tom goes to work in a factory caught up in a labor dispute, Mae breaks her arm in a tractor accident, Joe makes romantic passes at Mae, Mae goes to the factory to visit her husband who's now a scab locked in the factory, a stressed-out Tom fails to get it up, Mae whispers a gentle word, Tom gets it up, and so on.

Ten minutes from its end, the film delivers the second half of the Inciting Incident: Tom stumbles into Joe's office, sees a model of the dam, and says, in effect: "If you build that dam, Joe, you'll flood my farm." Joe shrugs. Then, deus ex machina, it starts to rain and the river rises. Tom and his buddies get their bulldozers to shore up the levee; Joe gets his bulldozer and goons to tear down the levee. Tom and Joe have a bulldozer-to-bulldozer Mexican standoff. At this point, Joe steps back and declares that he didn't want to build the dam in the first place. FADE OUT.

The protagonist must react to the Inciting Incident.
Given the infinitely variable nature of protagonists, however, any reaction is possible. For example, how many Westerns began like this? Bad guys shoot up the town and kill the old marshal. Townspeople gather and go down to the livery stable, run by Matt, a retired gunslinger who's sworn a sacred oath never to kill again. The mayor pleads: "Matt, you've got to pin on the badge and come to our aid. You're the only one that can do it." Matt replies: "No, no, I hung up my guns long ago." "But, Matt," begs the schoolmarm, "they killed your mother." Matt toes the dirt and says: "Well... she was old and I guess her time had come." He refuses to act, but that is a reaction.

The protagonist responds to the sudden negative or positive change in the balance of life in whatever way is appropriate to character and world. A refusal to act, however, cannot last for very long, even in the most passive protagonists of minimalist Nonplots. For we all wish some reasonable sovereignty over our existence, and if an event radically upsets our sense of equilibrium and control, what would we want? What does anyone, including our protagonist, want? To restore balance.

Therefore, the Inciting Incident first throws the protagonist's life out of balance, then arouses in him the desire to restore that balance. Out of this need—often quickly, occasionally with deliberation—the protagonist next conceives of an Object of Desire: something physical or situational or attitudinal that he feels he lacks or needs to put the ship of life on an even keel. Lastly, the Inciting Incident propels the protagonist into an active pursuit of this object or goal. And for many stories or genres this is sufficient: An event pitches the protagonist's life out of kilter, arousing a conscious desire for something he feels will set things right, and he goes after it.

But for those protagonists we tend to admire the most, the Inciting Incident arouses not only a conscious desire, but an unconscious one as well. These complex characters suffer intense inner battles because these two desires are in direct conflict with each other. No matter what the character consciously thinks he wants, the audience senses or realizes that deep inside he unconsciously wants the very opposite.
CARNAL KNOWLEDGE: If we were to pull the protagonist Jonathan (Jack Nicholson) aside and ask him “What do you want?” his conscious answer would be: “I’m a good-looking guy, lot of fun to be with, make a terrific living as a CPA. My life would be paradise if I could find the perfect woman to share it.” The film takes Jonathan from his college years to middle age, a thirty-year search for his dream woman. Again and again he meets a beautiful, intelligent woman, but soon their candlelit romance turns to dark emotions, acts of physical violence, then breakup. Over and over he plays the great romantic until he has a woman head over heels in love with him, then he turns on her, humiliates her, and hurls her out of his life.

At Climax, he invites Sandy (Art Garfunkel), an old college buddy, for dinner. For amusement he screens 35mm slides of all the women from his life; a show he entitles “Ballbusters on Parade.” As each woman appears, he trashes her to Sandy for “what was wrong with her.” In the Resolution scene, he’s with a prostitute (Rita Moreno) who has to read him an ode he’s written in praise of his penis so he can get it up. He thinks he’s hunting for the perfect woman, but we know that unconsciously he wants to degrade and destroy women and has done that throughout his life. Jules Feiffer’s screenplay is a chilling delineation of a man that too many women know only too well.

MRS. SOFFEL: In 1901 a thief (Mel Gibson) who’s committed murder awaits execution. The wife of the prison warden (Diane Keaton) decides to save his soul for God. She reads Bible quotations to him, hoping that when he’s hanged he’ll go to heaven and not hell.
They are attracted. She engineers his jailbreak, then joins him. On the run they make love, but only once. As the authorities close in, she realizes he's about to die and decides to die with him: "Shoot me," she begs him, "I don't want to live a day beyond you." He pulls the trigger but only wounds her. In the Resolution, she's imprisoned for life, but goes into her cell proudly, virtually spitting in the eye of her jailer.

Mrs. Soffel seems to flirt from choice to choice, but we sense that underneath her changes of mind is the powerful unconscious desire for a transcendent, absolute, romantic experience of such intensity that if nothing ever happened to her again it wouldn't matter... because for one sublime moment she will have lived. Mrs. Soffel is the ultimate romantic.

THE CRYING GAME: Fergus (Stephen Rea), a member of the Irish Republican Army, is put in charge of a British corporal (Forest Whitaker) held prisoner by his IRA unit. He finds himself in sympathy with the man's plight. When the corporal is killed, Fergus goes AWOL to England, hiding out from both the British and the IRA. He looks up the corporal's lover, Dil (Jaye Davidson). He falls in love, only to discover that Dil's a transvestite. The IRA then tracks him down. Fergus volunteered for the IRA knowing it isn't a college fraternity, so when they order him to assassinate an English judge, he must finally come to terms with his politics. Is he or is he not an Irish patriot?

Beneath Fergus's conscious political struggle, the audience senses from his first moments with the prisoner to his last tender scenes with Dil that this film isn't about his commitment to the cause. Hidden behind his zigzag politics Fergus harbors the most human of needs: to love and be loved.

THE SPINE OF THE STORY

The energy of a protagonist's desire forms the critical element of design known as the Spine of the story (AKA Through-line or Super-objective). The Spine is the deep desire in and effort by the protagonist to restore the balance of life. It's the primary unifying force that holds all other story elements together. For no matter what happens on the surface of the story, each scene, image, and word is
ultimately an aspect of the Spine, relating, causally or thematically, to this core of desire and action.

If the protagonist has no unconscious desire, then his conscious objective becomes the Spine. The Spine of any Bond film, for example, can be phrased as: *To defeat the arch-villain.* James has no unconscious desires; he wants and only wants to save the world. As the story’s unifying force, Bond’s pursuit of his conscious goal cannot change. If he were to declare, “To hell with Dr. No. I’m bored with the spy business. I’m going south to work on my backswing and lower my handicap,” the film falls apart.

If, on the other hand, the protagonist has an unconscious desire, this becomes the Spine of the story. An unconscious desire is always more powerful and durable, with roots reaching to the protagonist’s innermost self. When an unconscious desire drives the story, it allows the writer to create a far more complex character who may repeatedly change his conscious desire.

MOBY DICK: If Melville had made Ahab sole protagonist, his novel would be a simple but exciting work of *High Adventure,* driven by the captain’s monomania to destroy the white whale. But by adding Ishmael as dual protagonist, Melville enriched his story into a complex classic of the *Education Plot.* For the telling is in fact driven by Ishmael’s unconscious desire to battle inner demons, seeking in himself the destructive obsessions he sees in Ahab—a desire that not only contradicts his conscious hope to survive Ahab’s mad voyage, but may destroy him as it does Ahab.
In THE CRYING GAME Fergus agonizes over politics while his unconscious need to love and be loved drives the telling. Jonathan searches for the “perfect woman” in CARNAL KNOWLEDGE, flitting from relationship to relationship, while his unconscious desire to humiliate and destroy women never varies. The leaps of desire in Mrs. Soffel’s mind are enormous—from salvation to damnation—while unconsciously she seeks to experience the transcendent romance. The audience senses that the shifting urges of the complex protagonist are merely reflections of the one thing that never changes: the unconscious desire.

THE QUEST

From the point of view of the writer looking from the Inciting Incident “down the Spine” to the last act’s Climax, in spite of all we’ve said about genres and the various shapes from Archplot to Antiplot, in truth there’s only one story. In essence we have told one another the same tale, one way or another, since the dawn of humanity, and that story could be usefully called the Quest. All stories take the form of a Quest.

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

The essential form of story is simple. But that’s like saying that the essential form of music is simple. It is. It’s twelve notes. But these twelve notes conspire into everything and anything we have ever called music. The essential elements of the Quest are the twelve notes of our music, the melody we’ve listened to all our lives. However, like the composer sitting down at the piano, when a writer takes up this seemingly simple form, he discovers how incredibly complex it is, how inordinately difficult to do.

To understand the Quest form of your story you need only identify your protagonist’s Object of Desire. Penetrate his psychology and find an honest answer to the question: “What does he want?” It may be the desire for something he can take into his arms: someone to love in MOONSTRUCK. It may be the need for inner growth: maturity in BIG. But whether a profound change in the real world—security from a marauding shark in JAWS—or a profound change in the spiritual realm—a meaningful life in TENDER MERCIES—by looking into the heart of the protagonist and discovering his desire, you begin to see the arc of your story, the Quest on which the Inciting Incident sends him.
DESIGN OF THE INCITING INCIDENT

An Inciting Incident happens in only one of two ways: randomly or causally, either by coincidence or by decision. If by decision, it can be made by the protagonist—Ben’s decision to drink himself to death in LEAVING LAS VEGAS, or, as in KRAMER vs. KRAMER, by someone with the power to upset the protagonist’s life—Mrs. Kramer’s decision to leave Mr. Kramer and their child. If by coincidence, it may be tragic—the accident that kills Alice’s husband in ALICE DOESN’T LIVE HERE ANYMORE, or serendipitous—a sports promoter meets beautiful and gifted athlete in PAT AND MIKE. By choice or accident; there are no other means.

The Inciting Incident of the Central Plot must happen onscreen—not in the Backstory, not between scenes offscreen. Each subplot has its own Inciting Incident, which may or may not be onscreen, but the presence of the audience at the Central Plot’s Inciting Incident is crucial to story design for two reasons.

First, when the audience experiences an Inciting Incident, the film’s Major Dramatic Question, a variation on “How will this turn out?” is provoked to mind. JAWS: Will the sheriff kill the shark, or the shark the sheriff? LA NOTTE: After Lidia (Jeanne Moreau) tells her husband (Marcello Mastroianni) that he disgusts her and she’s leaving, will she go or stay? JALSAGHER (THE MUSIC ROOM): Biswas (Huzur Roy), an aristocrat with a life-consuming love of music, decides to sell his wife’s jewels, then his palace to finance his passion for beauty. Will extravagance destroy or redeem this connoisseur?

In Hollywood jargon, the Central Plot’s Inciting Incident is the “big hook.” It must occur onscreen because this is the event that incites and captures the audience’s curiosity. Hunger for the answer to the Major Dramatic Question grips the audience’s interest, holding it to the last act’s climax.

Second, witnessing the Inciting Incident projects an image of the Obligatory Scene into the audience’s imagination. The Obligatory Scene (AKA Crisis) is an event the audience knows it must see before the story can end. This scene will bring the protagonist into a confrontation with the most powerful forces of antagonism in his
quest, forces stirred to life by the Inciting Incident that will gather focus and strength through the course of the story. The scene is called "obligatory" because having teased the audience into anticipating this moment, the writer is obligated to keep his promise and show it to them.

_JAWS_: When the shark attacks a vacationer and the sheriff discovers her remains, an vivid image comes to mind: The shark and the sheriff do battle face-to-face. We don't know how we'll get there, or how it'll turn out. But we do know the film can't be over until the shark has the sheriff virtually in its jaws. Screenwriter Peter Benchley could not have played this critical event from the point of view of townspeople peering out to sea with binoculars, wondering: "Is that the sheriff? Is that the shark?" BOOM! Then have sheriff and marine biologist (Richard Dreyfuss) swim ashore, shouting, "Oh, what a fight. Let us tell you about it." Having projected the image in our mind, Benchley was obligated to put us with the sheriff when it happens.

Unlike action genres that bring the Obligatory Scene immediately and vividly to mind, other more interior genres hint at this scene in the Inciting Incident, then like a photo negative in acid solution, slowly bring it into focus. In _TENDER MERCIES_ Mac Sledge is drowning in booze and an utterly meaningless life. His ascent from rock bottom begins when he meets a lonely woman with a son who needs a father. He's inspired to write some new songs, then accepts baptism and tries to make peace with his estranged daughter. Gradually he pieces together a meaningful life.

The audience, however, senses that because the dragon of meaninglessness drove Sledge to rock bottom, it must once again rear its gruesome head, that the story can't end until he is slapped in the face with the cruel absurdity of life—this time in all its soul-destroying force. The Obligatory Scene comes in the form of a hideous accident that kills his only child. If a drunk needed an excuse to pick up a bottle again, this would do. Indeed, his daughter's death plunges his ex-wife into a drugged stupor, but Sledge finds strength to go on.

The death of Sledge's daughter was "obligatory" in this sense: Suppose Horton Foote had written this scenario: The friendless
alcoholic Sledge wakes up one morning with nothing to live for. He meets a woman, falls in love, likes her kid and wants to raise him, finds religion, and writes a new tune. FADE OUT. This isn't story; it's daydream. If the quest for meaning has brought about a profound inner change in Sledge, how is Foote to express this? Not through declarations of a change of heart. Self-explanatory dialogue convinces no one. It must be tested by an ultimate event, by pressure-filled character choice and action—the Obligatory (Crisis) Scene and Climax of the last act.

When I say that the audience "knows" an Obligatory Scene awaits, it doesn't know in an objective, checklist sense. If this event is mishandled, the audience won't exit thinking, "Lousy flick. No Obligatory Scene." Rather, the audience knows intuitively when something is missing. A lifetime of story ritual has taught the audience to anticipate that the forces of antagonism provoked at the Inciting Incident will build to the limit of human experience, and that the telling cannot end until the protagonist is in some sense face to face with these forces at their most powerful. Linking a story's Inciting Incident to its Crisis is an aspect of Foreshadowing, the arrangement of early events to prepare for later events. In fact, every choice you make—genre, setting, character, mood—foreshadows. With each line of dialogue or image of action you guide the audience to anticipate certain possibilities, so that when events arrive, they somehow satisfy the expectations you've created. The primary component of foreshadowing, however, is the projection of the Obligatory Scene (Crisis) into the audience's imagination by the Inciting Incident.

**LOCATING THE INCITING INCIDENT**

Where to place the Inciting Incident in the overall story design? As a rule of thumb, the first major event of the Central Plot occurs within the first 25 percent of the telling. This is a useful guide, no matter what the medium. How long would you make a theatre audience sit in the dark before engaging the story in a play? Would you make a reader plow through the first hundred pages of a four-hundred-page novel before finding the Central Plot? How long
before irredeemable boredom sets in? The standard for a two-hour feature film is to locate the Central Plot’s Inciting Incident somewhere within the first half-hour.

It could be the very first thing that happens. In the first thirty seconds of SULLIVAN’S TRAVELS Sullivan (Joel McCrea), a director of vapid but profitable films, defies studio bosses and sets out to make a film with social significance. Within the first two minutes of ON THE WATERFRONT Terry (Marlon Brando) unwittingly helps gangsters murder a friend.

Or much later. Twenty-seven minutes into TAXI DRIVER a teenage prostitute, Iris (Jodie Foster), jumps into Travis Bickle’s (Robert De Niro) taxi. Her abusive pimp, Matthew (Harvey Keitel) yanks her back to the street, igniting Travis’s desire to rescue her. A half-hour into ROCKY an obscure club fighter, Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone), agrees to fight Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers) for the heavyweight championship of the world. When Sam plays “As Time Goes By” thirty-two minutes into CASABLANCA, Ilsa suddenly reappears in Rick’s life, launching one of the screen’s great love stories.

Or anywhere in between. However, if the Central Plot’s Inciting Incident arrives much later than fifteen minutes into the film, boredom becomes a risk. Therefore, while the audience waits for the main plot, a subplot may be needed to engage their interest.

In TAXI DRIVER, the subplot of Travis’s lunatic attempt at political assassination grips us. In ROCKY we’re held by the ghetto love story of the painfully shy Adrian (Talia Shire) and the equally troubled Rocky. In CHINATOWN Gittes is duped into investigating Hollis Mulwray for adultery, and this subplot fascinates us as he struggles to untangle himself from the ruse. CASABLANCA’s Act One hooks us with the Inciting Incidents of no fewer than five well-paced subplots.

But why make an audience sit through a subplot, waiting half an hour for the main plot to begin? ROCKY, for example, is in the Sports Genre. Why not start with two quick scenes: The heavyweight champion gives an obscure club fighter a shot at the title (setup), followed by Rocky choosing to take the fight (payoff). Why not open the film with its Central Plot?
Because if ROCKY's Inciting Incident were the first event we saw, our reaction would have been a shrug and "So what?" Therefore, Stallone uses the first half-hour to delineate Rocky's world and character with craft and economy, so that when Rocky agrees to the fight, the audience's reaction is strong and complete: "Him? That loser!" They sit in shock, dreading the blood-soaked, bone-crushing defeat that lies ahead.

Bring in the Central Plot's Inciting Incident as soon as possible . . . but not until the moment is ripe.

An Inciting Incident must "hook" the audience, a deep and complete response. Their response must not only be emotional, but rational. This event must not only pull at audience's feelings, but cause them to ask the Major Dramatic Question and imagine the Obligatory Scene. Therefore, the location of the Central Plot's Inciting Incident is found in the answer to this question: How much does the audience need to know about the protagonist and his world to have a full response?

In some stories, nothing. If an Inciting Incident is archetypal in nature, it requires no setup and must occur immediately. The first sentence of Kafka's Metamorphosis reads: "One day Gregor Samsa awoke to discover he had been changed into a large cockroach." KRAMER VS. KRAMER: A wife walks out on her husband and leaves her child with him in the film's first two minutes. It needs no preparation, for we immediately understand the terrible impact that would have on anybody's life. JAWS: Shark eats swimmer, sheriff discovers body. These two scenes strike within the first seconds as we instantly grasp the horror.

Suppose Peter Benchley had opened JAWS with scenes of the sheriff quitting his job with the New York City police and moving out to Amity Island, looking forward to a peaceful life as a law officer in this resort town. We meet his family. We meet the town council and mayor. Early summer brings the tourists. Happy times. Then a shark eats somebody. And suppose Spielberg had been foolish enough to shoot all of this exposition, would we have
seen it? No. Editor Verna Fields would have dumped it on the cut-
tting room floor, explaining that all the audience needs to know
about the sheriff, his family, the mayor, city council, and tourists
will be nicely dramatized in the town's reaction to the attack . . . but
JAWS starts with the shark.

As soon as possible, but not until the moment is ripe . . . Every
story world and cast are different, therefore, every Inciting Incident
is a different event located at a different point. If it arrives too soon,
the audience may be confused. If it arrives too late, the audience
may be bored. The instant the audience has a sufficient under-
standing of character and world to react fully, execute your Inciting
Incident. Not a scene earlier, or a scene later. The exact moment is
found as much by feeling as by analysis.

If we writers have a common fault in design and placement of
the Inciting Incident, it's that we habitually delay the Central Plot
while we pack our opening sequences with exposition. We consis-
tently underestimate knowledge and life experience of the audi-
ence, laying out our characters and world with tedious details the
filmgoer has already filled in with common sense.

Ingmar Bergman is one of the cinema's best directors because he
is, in my opinion, the cinema's finest screenwriter. And the one
quality that stands above all the others in Bergman's writing is his
extreme economy—how little he tells us about anything. In his
THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY, for example, all we ever learn about
his four characters is that the father is a widowed, best-selling novelist,
his son-in-law a doctor, his son a student, and his daughter a schizo-
phrenic, suffering from the same illness that killed her mother. She's
been released from a mental hospital to join her family for a few days
by the sea, and that act alone upsets the balance of forces in all their
lives, propelling a powerful drama from the first moments.

No book-signing scenes to help us understand that the father is
a commercial but not critical success. No scenes in an operating
room to demonstrate the doctor's profession. No boarding school
scenes to explain how much the son needs his father. No electric
shock treatment sessions to explain the daughter's anguish.
Bergman knows that his urbane audience quickly grasps the impli-
cations behind best-seller, doctor, boarding school, and mental hospital... and that less is always more.

**THE QUALITY OF THE INCITING INCIDENT**

A favorite joke among film distributors goes like this: A typical European film opens with golden, sunlit clouds. Cut to even more splendid, bouffant clouds. Cut again to yet more magnificent, rubescent clouds. A Hollywood film opens with golden, billowing clouds. In the second shot a 747 jumbo jet comes out of the clouds. In the third, it explodes.

What quality of event need an Inciting Incident be?

**ORDINARY PEOPLE** carries a Central Plot and subplot that are often mistaken for each other because of their unconventional design. Conrad (Timothy Hutton) is the protagonist of the film’s subplot with an Inciting Incident that takes the life of his older brother during a storm at sea. Conrad survives but is guilt-ridden and suicidal. The brother’s death is in the Backstory and is dramatized in flashback at the Crisis/Climax of the subplot when Conrad relives the boating accident and chooses to live.

The Central Plot is driven by Conrad’s father, Calvin (Donald Sutherland). Although seemingly passive, he is by definition the protagonist: the empathetic character with the will and capacity to pursue desire to the end of the line. Throughout the film, Calvin is on a quest for the cruel secret that haunts his family and makes reconciliation between his son and wife impossible. After a painful struggle, he finds it: His wife hates Conrad, not since the death of her older son, but since Conrad’s birth.

At the Crisis Calvin confronts his wife, Beth (Mary Tyler Moore) with the truth: She’s an obsessively orderly woman who wanted only one child. When her second son came along, she resented his craving for love when she could love only her first-born. She’s always hated Conrad, and he’s always felt it. This is why he’s been suicidal over his brother’s death. Calvin then forces the Climax: She must learn to love Conrad or leave. Beth goes to a closet, packs a suitcase, and heads out the door. She cannot face her inability to love her son.
This Climax answers the Major Dramatic Question: Will the family solve its problems within itself or be torn apart? Working backward from it, we seek the Inciting Incident, the event that has upset the balance of Calvin's life and sent him on his quest.

The film opens with Conrad coming home from a psychiatric hospital, presumably cured of his suicidal neurosis. Calvin feels that the family has survived its loss and balance has been restored. The next morning Conrad, in a grim mood, sits opposite his father at the breakfast table. Beth puts a plate of French toast under her son's face. He refuses to eat. She snatches the plate away, marches to the sink, and scrapes his breakfast down a garbage disposal, muttering: "You can't keep French toast."

Director Robert Redford's camera cuts to the father as the man's life crashes. Calvin instantly senses that the hatred is back with a vengeance. Behind it hides something fearful. This chilling event grips the audience with dread as it reacts, thinking: "Look what she did to her child! He's just home from the hospital and she's doing this number on him."

Novelist Judith Guest and screenwriter Alvin Sargent gave Calvin a quiet characterization, a man who won't leap up from the table and try to bully wife and son into reconciliation. His first thought is to give them time and loving encouragements, such as the family photo scene. When he learns of Conrad's troubles at school, he hires a psychiatrist for him. He talks gently with his wife, hoping to understand.

Because Calvin is a hesitant, compassionate man, Sargent had to build the dynamic of the film's progressions around the subplot. Conrad's struggle with suicide is far more active than Calvin's subtle quest. So Sargent foregrounded the boy's subplot, giving it inordinate emphasis and screen time, while carefully increasing the momentum of the Central Plot in the background. By the time the subplot ends in the psychiatrist's office, Calvin is ready to bring the Central Plot to its devastating end. The point, however, is that the Inciting Incident of ORDINARY PEOPLE is triggered by a woman scraping French toast down a garbage disposal.
Henry James wrote brilliantly about story art in the prefaces to his novels, and once asked: "What, after all, is an event?" An event, he said, could be as little as a woman putting her hand on the table and looking at you "that certain way." In the right context, just a gesture and a look could mean, "I'll never see you again," or "I'll love you forever"—a life broken or made.

The quality of the Inciting Incident (for that matter, any event) must be germane to the world, characters, and genre surrounding it. Once it is conceived, the writer must concentrate on its function. Does the Inciting Incident radically upset the balance of forces in the protagonist’s life? Does it arouse in the protagonist the desire to restore balance? Does it inspire in him the conscious desire for that object, material or immaterial, he feels would restore the balance? In a complex protagonist, does it also bring to life an unconscious desire that contradicts his conscious need? Does it launch the protagonist on a quest for his desire? Does it raise the Major Dramatic Question in the mind of the audience? Does it project an image of the Obligatory Scene? If it does all this, then it can be as little as a woman putting her hand on the table, looking at you "that certain way."

**CREATING THE INCITING INCIDENT**

The Climax of the last act is far and away the most difficult scene to create: It's the soul of the telling. If it doesn't work, the story doesn't work. But the second most difficult scene to write is the Central Plot's Inciting Incident. We rewrite this scene more than any other. So here are some questions to ask that should help bring it to mind.

What is the worst possible thing that could happen to my protagonist? How could that turn out to be the best possible thing that could happen to him?

**KRAMER VS. KRAMER.** The worst: Disaster strikes the workaholic Kramer (Dustin Hoffman) when his wife walks out on him and her child. The best: This turns out to be the shock he needed to fulfill his unconscious desire to be a loving human being.

**AN UNMARRIED WOMAN.** The worst: When her husband says he's leaving her for another woman, Erica (Jill Clayburgh)
retches. The best: His exit turns out to be the freeing experience that allows this male-dependent woman to fulfill her unconscious desire for independence and self-possession.

Or: What’s the best possible thing that could happen to my protagonist? How could it become the worst possible thing?

DEATH IN VENICE. Von Aschenbach (Dirk Bogarde) has lost his wife and children to a plague. Since then he’s buried himself in his work to the point of physical and mental collapse. His doctor sends him to the Venice spa to recuperate. The best: There he falls madly, helplessly in love . . . but with a boy. His passion for the impossibly beautiful youth, and the impossibility of it, leads to despair. The worst: When a new plague invades Venice and the child’s mother hurries her son away, Von Aschenbach lingers to wait for death and escape from his misery.

THE GODFATHER, PART II. The best: After Michael (Al Pacino) is made Don of the Corleone crime family, he decides to take his family into the legitimate world. The worst: His ruthless enforcement of the mafia code of loyalty ends in the assassination of his closest associates, estrangement from his wife and children, and the murder of his brother, leaving him a hollowed-out, desolate man.

A story may turn more than one cycle of this pattern. What is the best? How could that become the worst? How could that reverse yet again into the protagonist’s salvation? Or: What is the worst? How could that become the best? How could that lead the protagonist to damnation? We stretch toward the “bests” and “worst” because story—when it is art—is not about the middle ground of human experience.

The impact of the Inciting Incident creates our opportunity to reach the limits of life. It’s a kind of explosion. In Action genres it may be in fact an explosion: in other films, as muted as a smile. No matter how subtle or direct, it must upset the status quo of the protagonist and jolt his life from its existing pattern, so that chaos invades the character’s universe. Out of this upheaval, you must find, at Climax, a resolution, for better or worse, that rearranges this universe into a new order.