

Introduction to Story Maps

The Story Map is a method of constructing and deconstructing a narrative that I originally developed working as a Story Analyst for major studios and production companies in the film industry, and honed over time as I worked with hundreds of writers as a teacher and a consultant.

95% of modern movies use the Story Map template. This is how professional screenwriters structure their scripts, and in mapping existing films, you can best see how they did it. The story map reveals the building blocks of the narrative. It's how commercial movies are structured and paced, so your script should reflect this structure and pace on the page. If movies are edited this way, then your screenplay should be edited this way, as well, so you suck in the reader and give them the experience of an audience member watching your film.

Specifically, the Story Map breaks down a narrative into its 12 Main Dramatic Elements, 4 story engines and 12-15 major "signpost" beats that form the bones of your narrative. This is not just standard three-act structure you've seen written about in many other sources, because I define my beats in a more detailed, accessible and practical manner that applies to any genre and is always in the same order.

Since I believe that written analysis of movies and screenplays is the best tool for learning the craft, I encourage you to story map your favorite films and study them beat by beat, which is what I've done with the many films in my books and what my students continue to do every day as they learn how to apply the structure of professional scripts to their own screenplays.

Keep in mind that the Story Map is a form, not a formula. It does not dictate your choices or tell you what to write; it provides a framework to hold your choices. Writing from a well-developed Story Map is not just about hitting page points, but using what I call *Active Storytelling*, which is making your scenes and your characters' actions advance the story and bring about change while maintaining a cohesion built on theme and escalating conflict. This is exactly what the screenwriters behind today's biggest critical and commercial successes achieve.

My method is discussed at length and shown in action in my e-books series, starting with the flagship title, [Story Maps: How to Write a GREAT Screenplay](#). You can also learn more about it on my site, ActFourScreenplays.com.

You may use the worksheet below to write a Story Map for your own screenplay. Just copy the elements into a word doc and insert your creative choices.

Good Luck and Happy Writing,

Daniel P. Calvisi

TITLE:

GENRE:

BASIC STORY MAP:

The Protagonist:

Skill (their greatest talent/power):

Misbehavior (a trait that consistently generates conflict):

Achilles Heel/Flaw (their greatest weakness):

External (plot, action) Goal:

Internal (character, emotional) Goal:

The Main Dramatic Conflict:

The Theme:

The Central Dramatic Question:

The Ending:

The Arc of Change:

LOGLINE (40 words max):

FULL STORY MAP:

STORY ENGINES: one sentence (just one!) to describe the protagonist's major goal/need or the major plot movement of each of the four "Acts." (e.g., *Neo enters The Matrix for the first time and must use his newfound powers to battle an Agent.*)

ACT ONE:

ACT TWO-A:

ACT TWO-B:

ACT THREE:

BEAT SHEET:

ACT ONE:

1) OPENING (Page 1-3):

2) INCITING INCIDENT (Page 5-10):

3) STRONG MOVEMENT FORWARD (Page 17-20):

4) END OF ACT ONE EVENT/TURN (Page 25-30):

DECISION:

ACT TWO-A:

5) FIRST TRIAL/FIRST CASUALTY (Page 38-40):

5A) COMBAT (Page 45):

6) MIDPOINT (Page 50-55):

6A) ONE HOUR WAR/TRIUMPH (Page 60):

ACT TWO-B:

7) DECLARATION OF WAR/ASSUMPTION OF POWER (Page 75):

8) END OF ACT TWO EVENT/TURN (Page 85-90):

DECISION:

ACT THREE:

9) TRUE POINT OF NO RETURN (Page 100):

10) CLIMAX (Page 105-110):

11) EPILOGUE (OPTIONAL):

SAMPLE MAP...

STORY MAP WORKSHEET & SAMPLE MAP

7.



SAMPLE STORY MAP: *UP*

Pixar's *Up* is a fine example of the company's ability to produce touching stories for broad audiences— they are masters at creating the coveted “four quadrant” films that Hollywood salivates over, meaning they appeal to male and female kids and male and female adults.

Although *Up* has some stilted dialogue and cliché moments, it features some fantastic thematic work, thrilling set pieces and powerful character arcs. The length is short – only 89 minutes – so the beats following the *Declaration of War/Assumption of Power* occur sooner than with a standard-length (100-110 minutes/pages) movie/script.

Notice how Carl's character attributes are worked into the plot: he lost a child, so he's given a chance to become a father to a young boy. His journey is to fulfill his romantic boyhood dream, a step towards the past, so he meets the man who inspired that romantic notion, Carl Muntz, who becomes the villain, thus forcing Carl to leave his past behind.

Up (2009)

Animated Action-Comedy
Screenplay by Bob Peterson & Pete Docter
89 Minutes

BASIC STORY MAP

PROTAGONIST: CARL, 78, retired widower

Misbehavior: Crotchety old man

Skill: A good father figure when it matters

Flaw/Achilles Heel: Refuses to change

EXTERNAL GOAL: To get to Paradise Falls

INTERNAL GOAL: To leave the past behind/ Become Russell's father figure

MAIN DRAMATIC CONFLICT: Russell and Charles Muntz

THEME: You can't cling to the past

CENTRAL DRAMATIC QUESTION: Can Carl and Russell work together to survive their adventure?

ENDING: Carl defeats Charles Muntz and becomes Russell's father figure.

ARC: Carl goes from a crotchety old man to a caring best friend and father figure to Russell.

LOGLINE: When an old widower flies his house to South America, he must team up with his stowaway, an obnoxious Boy Scout, to defeat his childhood hero, now an evil hunter.

FULL STORY MAP

STORY ENGINES

ACT 1: Carl sets out on his trip but discovers a stowaway, an obnoxious Boy Scout, before crash landing near Paradise Falls.

ACT 2A: Carl and Russell struggle to survive against the evil dogs and meet Charles Muntz, Carl's boyhood hero.

ACT 2B: Carl must abandon his old ways and adopt a new plan to defeat Muntz.

ACT 3: Carl defeats Muntz and loses his house, deciding to start a new life with his adopted son.

THE BEAT SHEET

(note: this is not a complete scene list)

ACT ONE

1 – **OPENING**: Montage of CARL and his wife ELLIE over the years. They lost a baby.

10 – **INCITING INCIDENT**: Carl buys tickets for Paradise Falls and Ellie dies before they can go.

20 – **STRONG MOVEMENT FORWARD**: Carl launches his house into the air, and discovers RUSSELL is his stowaway.

27 – **END OF ACT ONE TURN**: Carl and Russell hit a dangerous storm.

30 – **DECISION**: Carl guides the house to a crash landing near Paradise Falls.

ACT TWO-A

40 – **FIRST TRIAL/FIRST CASUALTY**: Carl gets talked into taking KEVIN, the bird, and DUG, the dog, with them, which complicates their journey to the falls.

45 – **COMBAT**: They are hunted by the evil dogs.

53-55 – **MIDPOINT**: They meet the famous adventurer CHARLES MUNTZ, Carl's childhood hero, and learn he is evil and has been hunting Kevin for years. Carl and Russell must save Kevin and escape Muntz' dirigible, protected by his dark army of scary dogs.

60 – **WAR**: They run for their lives!

ACT TWO-B

75 – **DECLARATION OF WAR/ASSUMPTION OF POWER:** Carl throws his old possessions out of his house and takes flight, leaving behind the old Carl and declaring war on Muntz to save his adopted child, Russell, and Kevin.

80 – **END OF ACT TWO TURN:** All sides battle. Carl vs. Muntz. Dug vs. the Doberman. Russell vs. the dogs.

81 – **DECISION:** Carl puts his plan to defeat Muntz into action.

ACT THREE

85 – **TRUE POINT OF NO RETURN:** Carl cleverly defeats Muntz. As Muntz falls to his death, Carl loses the house in the clouds. Carl: "You know, it's just a house." He's decided to live in this life, not in the past.

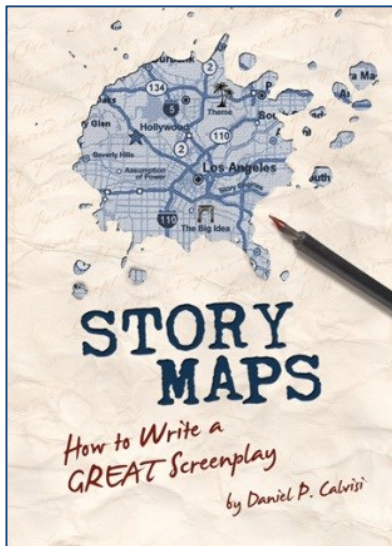
86 – Kevin, revealed to be a girl, gives birth to chicks!

87 – **CLIMAX:** Carl and Russell pilot Muntz's blimp home, and Carl stands in as Russell's father when Russell receives his Boy Scouts badge for "Assisting the Elderly." Carl gives him "Ellie's Badge."

89 – **EPILOGUE:** Carl and Russell eat ice cream and the final image shows the house on Paradise Falls. Carl's dream has been achieved.

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Want to explore more Story Maps of great movies from all genres?

Read more about Story Maps, sign up for my newsletter and purchase a special discount e-book bundle [here](#).

Discover Story Maps for Kindle on Amazon [here](#).

Dear screenwriter,

I am happy to extend to you a discount rate on my **Story Maps Master Class**, which is an online screenwriting program that guides you from logline to submission-ready spec script, with more feedback on your work than any other online course, with the added bonus of logline reviews from current working professionals like major agency personnel, development executives and professional screenwriters.

In fact, I am excited to announce a working relationship with a top 10 management company in Los Angeles! A working manager will not only give you notes on your loglines but also consider your completed screenplay for representation.

Read more about the Master Class [here](#).

If you would like to register or have questions, please do not hesitate to email me at dan@actfourscreenplays.com.

Good luck and Happy Writing!

Daniel Calvisi

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