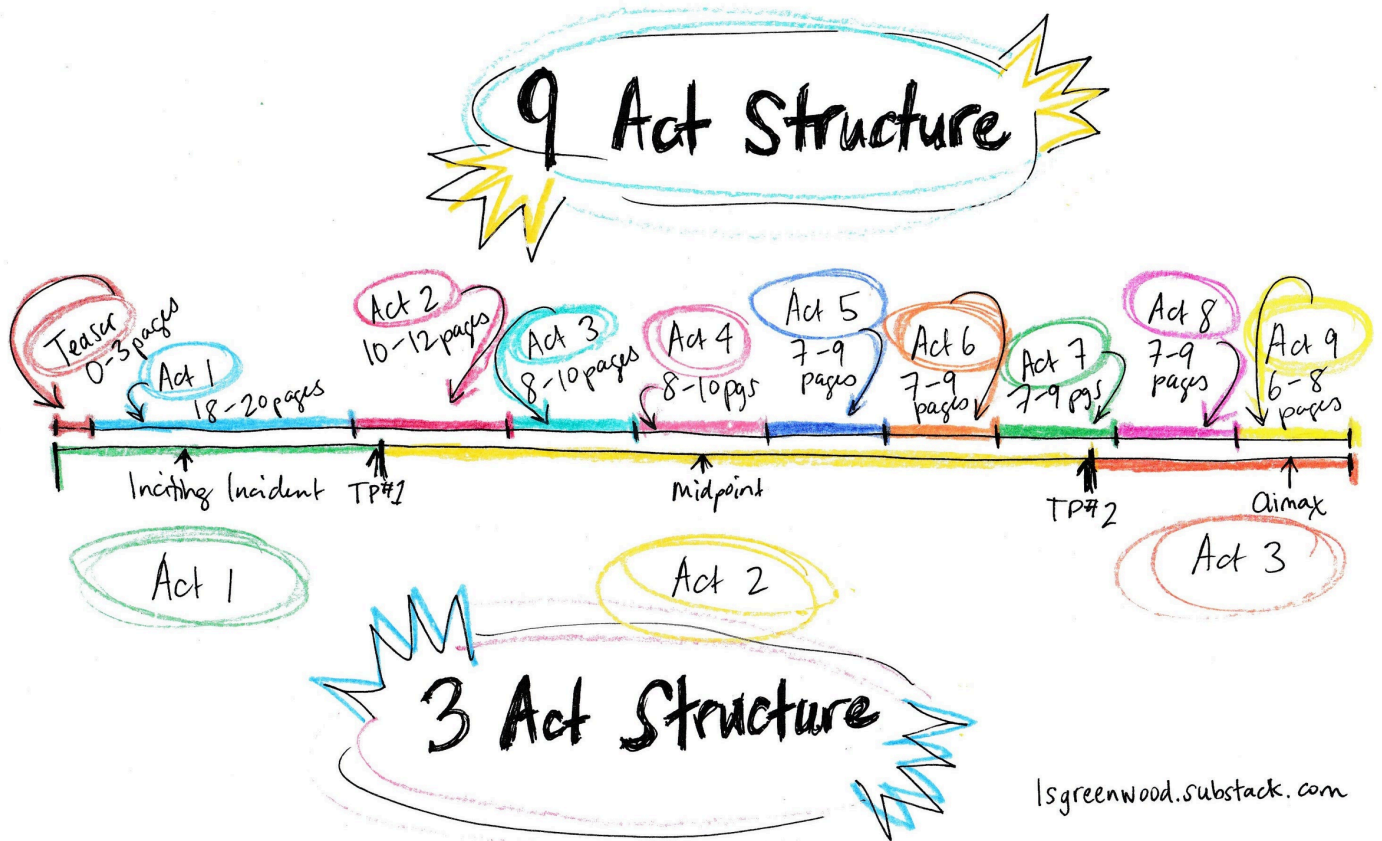


9 ACT STRUCTURE

CREATED BY LAUREN GREENWOOD



9 Act Structure Overview

If you've read [my lil primer on TV movies](#), you'll know that MOWs (Movies of the Week) were conceived in today's form in the 60s to draw audiences away from the cinema. This had a huge financial incentive because, in the course of a 90-minute film in a two-hour time slot, networks had eight opportunities, or upwards of a half an hour, to advertise directly to people who had already proven that they love movies.

Why a Special Structure?

The 3 act structure is incompatible with the placement of commercial breaks on network television. That's because, before each of the eight commercial breaks in a TV movie, something needs to happen that will ensure audiences sit through the advertisers' messages and come back for more.

That means a cliffhanger, a gripping moment, a sparkle of budding romance, a threat of Christmas being ruined, etc., that hooks the audience with the question: "What's going to happen next?!"

While I'm using thrillers to exemplify structure here, this loose structure also applies to other genres of TV movies.

TV Movie Structure Today

With TV movies appearing on streamers, a strict adherence to the 9 act structure is becoming less important. That being said...

REGARDLESS OF STRUCTURE OR GENRE, SOMETHING THRILLING NEEDS TO HAPPEN EVERY 10 TO 15 PAGES IN A TV MOVIE.

And the easiest way to achieve that is to follow the 9 Act Structure.

Advantages of 9 Act Structure

1. Built in structure that works for streamers or network TV
2. Pacier, more gripping and engaging films
3. Clearer map of how to write a feature: Great for beginner writers!

Before you write...

Watch as many TV movies as possible to start to internalize the cadence. Break down the acts as you analyze: On network TV, the acts are easy to identify because they always end at a commercial break. On streamers, look for cuts to black to signify where commercials were factored in during editing.

Breaking Down the 9 Act Structure

Below you'll find a full breakdown of the 9 Act Structure. I've used my script for the TV thriller [MURDER RUNS IN THE FAMILY](#) as the example, which you can watch on Lifetime Movie Network or Amazon Prime in the US.

Please note: The script does not always completely reflect the final film! Much can change in the edit especially because the finished TV movie has to be trimmed to an exact time.

SPOILER WARNING: This document contains spoilers! Proceed accordingly.



Length of Acts

Act #	Page count
0 (aka "teaser")	1-3
1	17-20
2	10-12
3	8-10
4	8-10
5	7-9
6	7-9
7	7-9
8	7-9
9	6-7

Teaser (aka "Act 0")

1-3 pages

The teaser sets the tone for the film, letting the audience know in the first 60 seconds that this movie is going to take them on a thrilling ride. Teasers are much more common in thrillers than in the other TV movie genres.

Usually, the teaser in a thriller is...

- an attack, which is most likely anachronistic...
- a flashback to an attack that's already happened

- a flash forward to something that audiences will see later in more detail, most likely during the climax

If a flash forward is the route you take, it's important to ensure that the teaser doesn't contain any spoilers. You have to keep them guessing to keep them hooked.

The teaser, in fact, doesn't need to reveal any information about the story or characters at all. Its only purpose is to grab the audience and promise to not let go for another 90 minutes (or longer if you're watching with commercials!)

MURDER RUNS IN THE FAMILY example: We see JULIE crying on the edge of the bathtub before someone sneaks in and murders her. As our protagonist WREN pulls up in the driveway, the killer slips away.

Act 1 - The Setup

17-20 pages

This longest act introduces our protagonist, main characters, sets up their ordinary world, and contains the inciting incident, much like the first act of a theatrical film.

The reason it's so long is that Act 1 of a TV movie must be meaty enough that we actually start to care about the protagonist and secondary characters before we hit that first commercial break. Otherwise people will not come back to see the rest. And that's bad because we have 8 sets of commercials lined up for them to absorb in the next two hours!

The challenge with Act 1 is that, while it's a longer chunk of the movie, it still needs to clip along at a good pace.

Balance exposition with keeping the story moving quickly.



As always: Show don't tell, whenever possible!

Act 1 needs to end with a **BANG!** at around the 20-25 minute mark. During this final scene before we go to the first commercial, the protagonist and/or the audience needs to get the first glimpse of danger and thereby understand that the threat they are facing is very real.

The thriller beats have to be escalating until the climax from here, so you don't want to use your most thrilling moment just yet.

MURDER RUNS IN THE FAMILY example: We see OLIVER (our first red herring), Wren's ex-fiancé and purported "good guy" in his apartment with photos of Wren that are all slashed up.

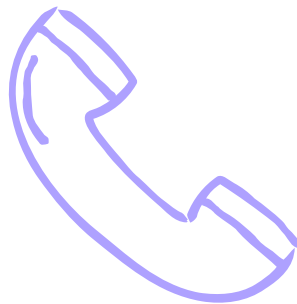
Why does he hate her so much? Why was he being so supportive? And what is he going to do to her now that she's in his grasp once more? These are the questions we want the audience asking as those commercials roll!

Act 2 - Accepting the Call

10-12 pages

And we're back from that first commercial break!

During Act 2, like at the end of Act 1 in the three act structure, the protagonist will accept the call and fully enter the world of the story.



This act builds on the tension we've been starting to develop at the end of Act 1. It also serves to further flesh out the world of the story and helps us understand the antagonistic forces the protagonist is about to face.

Act 2 will likely bring the first or even the second red herring, the character the audience is meant to suspect may be the villain.

HOT TIP: CREATING MORE THAN ONE RED HERRING IS IDEAL. IT KEEPS THE AUDIENCE (WHO ARE ALREADY LOOKING FOR ONE!) GUESSING!

This act doesn't necessarily have to end with a huge thriller moment, but it needs to end on something compelling enough to keep them hooked.

- Some juicy information is revealed
- A secret is discovered
- A thriller beat is foreshadowed

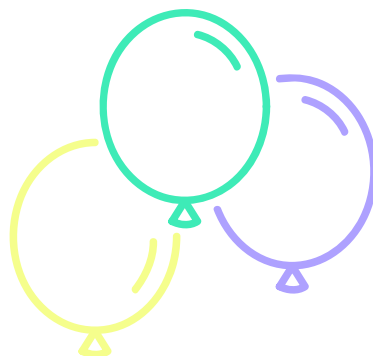
When writing this final scene of Act 2, create intrigue to keep them guessing about what's next through the commercial break!

MURDER RUNS IN THE FAMILY example: Wren deduces that her mother Julie's death probably wasn't an accident and starts her own investigation (answering the call!). MIA, the nosy neighbour who watches Wren from the bathroom window, is set up as the second red herring.

Act 3 - "Fun & Games"

8-10 pages

This act is all about "fun & games", as Blake Snyder calls the first part of Act 2 in a three act script.



Unfortunately, if we're in a thriller, the games for the protagonist won't be so fun. The villain will be toying with them and is still a few steps ahead. Their situation is getting progressively stickier.

In this act, the protagonist might be in denial about what's happening to them OR they might not be able to convince those closest to them that there really is a threat at all. They are just starting to peel back the

layers of this mystery, and they probably don't yet fully understand themselves how dangerous things are about to get for them.

This act needs to end with another **BANG!** Your audience is getting antsy now that we're 40ish minutes in, so you need something to remind them why they are here.

This could be...

- a big obstacle to the protagonist accomplishing their goal
- some earth-shattering information
- a jaw-dropping twist or reversal that rips the rug out from under everyone (audience included!)

Locking the audience in completely now is critical because from this point forward, the commercial breaks are coming hard and fast, compared to the first half. Only a truly invested audience member will tolerate the interruptions that are to come!

MURDER RUNS IN THE FAMILY example: Wren snoops around in Mia's house looking for evidence she was involved in Julie's death but Mia catches her. As Wren's fleeing, she's snatched by an unknown assailant. Cut to commercial!

LOCKING THE AUDIENCE IN NOW IS CRITICAL BECAUSE, FROM THIS POINT FORWARD, THE COMMERCIALS ARE HARD & FAST.

ONLY A TRULY INVESTED AUDIENCE MEMBER WILL TOLERATE THE INTERRUPTIONS THAT ARE TO COME!

Act 4 - The Pressure Cooker

8-10 pages

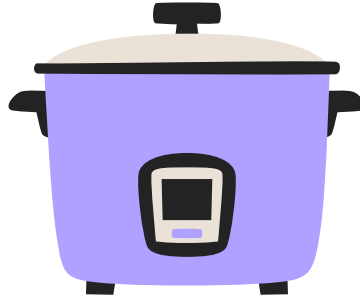
In this act, the pressure is cookin'. Tension and conflict are a 'bubblin'.

This act contains the **midpoint** of the film. The midpoint in a TV movie is similar to the function of the midpoint in a three act script, which brings a **big twist that changes the protagonist's trajectory**.

MIDPOINT: THE POINT OF NO RETURN FOR YOUR PROTAGONIST.
THE STORY TRAIN IS CAREENING TOWARDS THE CLIMAX.

In TV movies, some say the midpoint is in the middle of Act 4, others argue it's at the end.

For me, since the midpoint is usually an intense thriller beat, it makes sense to have it at the end of the act. If you choose to place your midpoint in the middle of act 4 by making it a revelation instead of a thriller beat, please ensure that you have a thriller beat at the end of the act.



By the end of Act 4, it needs to be clear that the protagonist is fully engulfed in the danger that surrounds them.

Never forget to do your worst to your protagonist. It'll be all the more satisfying in the end when they come out on top!

We've all heard variations of "Act One, get your protagonist up a tree; Act Two, throw rocks at them; Act Three, get them down out of the tree"

The midpoint is when you switch from stones to catapulting boulders.

MURDER RUNS IN THE FAMILY example: The midpoint is a reveal--Wren learns that her biological mother Sonya died in the same way as her adoptive mother Julie and her father has been keeping that from her. At the end of the act, Mia threatens Wren outright.

Act 5 - Still Using Old Tactics

7-9 pages

From Act 5 forward, the pace of the story should be increasing. The acts are getting shorter, so the thrills are coming faster. It should feel like the protagonist can't catch a breath or a break from the midpoint onward.

In Act 5, the protagonist has been knocked down, but they are still trying to win. Sadly for them, they are still using the same old tactics they've been using all along, which, as we've seen, haven't been getting them anywhere.



The hero still has many lessons to learn so they can change and grow enough to face the villain in the end.

IF THE FINAL SHOWDOWN WAS RIGHT NOW, THEY WOULD SURELY LOSE.

In this act, it may even seem like they are gaining some traction, only to learn that they have been chasing the wrong person or wrong lead.

Crucially, Act 5 may also bring the moment when they lose support from their circle and realize they have to go it alone.

The last moment before the end of this act should be a thriller moment that really drives home how the person the protagonist believes is the villain is currently winning.

MURDER RUNS IN THE FAMILY example: After discovering that Oliver has drugged her at Julie's wake, Wren runs away from him in a heart-pounding chase sequence. It really seems like Oliver is the killer!

Act 6 - Chasing Wrong Villain

7-9 pages

This act is all about piling more and more on the protagonist as we get closer to the climax. We aren't yet at the low point of Act 7, but...

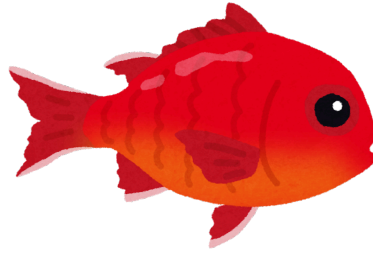
THINGS ARE GETTING VERY BAD AS THE OBSTACLES BUILD.

The conflict and problems are boiling below the surface. It's becoming painfully clear that the protagonist needs to rework their approach to the problem in order to accomplish their goal, since they know now that it hasn't been working for them.

They are likely still chasing the red herring at this point, convinced that this is the true villain. Maybe they even have a small win here to

give the illusion that they are on the right path, only to have the rug pulled out from under them in Act 7.

Maybe we the audience learn that who they thought was the killer is just a red herring.



The final scene before the commercial break needs to be an escalating thriller beat. The audience needs to know that the protagonist is in serious trouble now and has to be itching to see how it turns out.

MURDER RUNS IN THE FAMILY example: Wren escapes Oliver, who we all believe is the killer, only to see him taken out by the real killer himself!

Act 7 - Dark Night of the Soul

7-9 pages

This act is the one that leads into the climax that happens in Act 8, so things could not be worse for our protagonist in Act 7. This is their low point ("the dark night of the soul" moment) when it seems like success is impossible.



In this act, the protagonist usually discovers who the true villain is and must adjust their plan in the moment, with the knowledge they've acquired through the story, to prepare to take down this real killer.

The act will end with the protagonist making the difficult decision to face the villain head on and launch themselves into the final showdown.

Sometimes in TV thrillers, this decision is made for them when they are blindsided by the true villain in a terrifying thriller beat.

THE EQUIVALENT TO THE 2ND TURNING POINT IN A THREE ACT FILM THAT CATAPULTS THE PROTAGONIST INTO ACT 3.

MURDER RUNS IN THE FAMILY example: Wren discovers that her father (another red herring) was there when her biological mother Sonya died and did nothing to save her. She asks her brother BRODY for help taking him to the police, only to have Brody knock her out!

Act 8 - The Final Showdown

7-9 pages

This act contains *most* of the climax, or as I usually call it, the final showdown. This is when the protagonist faces off against the true villain in an epic fight. If the protagonist are already in the villain's grasp after being caught by them in Act 7, they need to fight like hell to break free.

IN A TV THRILLER, THE STAKES MUST ALWAYS BE SKY HIGH:
IF THE PROTAGONIST DOESN'T WIN, SHE'LL BE DEAD.

During the final showdown, she may be aided by...

- her inner circle, who now finally believe she's in grave danger
- the red herring, who she learns isn't the bad guy she thought they were



In Act 8, it's extremely important that you go out with the biggest bang yet at the height of this epic battle: Your protagonist's very life needs to hang in the balance as you push into that final commercial break.

The audience must be clamouring to find out if she's going to make it through this or if the villain will win in the end.

MURDER RUNS IN THE FAMILY example: Just like her adoptive and biological mothers, Wren finds herself about to be drowned in a bathtub. She manages to escape, but Brody catches her. Her little sister steps in to save her.

Act 9 - The Resolution

6-7 pages

Since we've seen most of the climax in the last act, now all that remains to be seen is how that final battle ends and what happens next.

It may seem obvious on paper, but the final battle has to be won by the protagonist and no one else. She's the only one who can deal that final blow.

If you ever watch a thriller and the climax feels anticlimactic, it's probably because the protagonist themselves isn't the one who ultimately defeats the villain in the end

They've been working so hard to gather the tools to be able to defeat the villain: You've got to let them have this win!



There isn't actually much ground to cover after the climax, which is why act 9 is the shortest act of all. Most buyers of TV thrillers expect that the villain will be brought to justice, so the protagonist doesn't need to kill them in the end.

In fact, the protagonist should be morally above murder, so if the killer does die in the end, it can't be intentionally caused by the protagonist.

Anyone else who was in danger as a result of the story will also be saved by the protagonist in this act. A common trope for act 9 is the image of the protagonist wrapped in a blanket watching as the police take the perp away.

AFTER THE FINAL BLOW OF THE CLIMAX, ACT 9 ALSO GIVES US THE DENOUEMENT.

The denouement is the emotional payoff for everything we've just seen.

It's usually shown in the form of a time jump. It's X months later and the protagonist is home or settled in their new life. Due to the growth they experienced during the trials and tribulations they suffered, they are even happier than they were before.

Relationships that were tested have been strengthened. Dreams they had before the villain came into their life have now been realized. This is the satisfaction that the viewer has been anticipating this whole time. Their investment in watching this film has paid off (and it paid off for the advertisers too!)

While developed to work for TV, the 9 Act Structure is a great basis for any script to hook an audience!



THERE YOU HAVE IT.

THE MOST DETAILED BREAKDOWN
OF THE 9 ACT STRUCTURE
FOR TV MOVIES ON THE
INTERNET.

I WOULD LOVE YOUR FEEDBACK.
OR TO WORK TOGETHER.
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