

Plot.

“ A story should have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order.”
-Jean-Luc Godard

If you're doing a full-length pitch (or any pitch longer than 2 minutes) we urge you to pitch your plot by articulating act breaks. Three acts are the custom when pitching motion pictures, while television uses anywhere from two to seven acts, depending on format. While not every script or finished film has clear act breaks, the use of three act breaks when pitching is essential. In ad-sponsored television, the use of act breaks is even more entrenched because they define the commercial breaks. It is the tradition in television to not only pitch act breaks but also to indicate them in the final written teleplay. In feature films, act breaks are based more on dramatic theory, but because three acts is the way the industry talks about structure, you should be familiar with the theory.

There are two main reasons to articulate act breaks in your pitch. One, act breaks help convey a sense of the timeline of your final product. If your listener has to ask where you are in your story (from a screen-time perspective), you're in trouble. Two, act breaks help you frame and 'punctuate' the significant story beats as you pitch: set-up, complication and resolution.

Describing act structure, and how to use it in writing, is beyond the scope of this book, but for the purposes of pitching motion pictures, the key elements are:

Act One takes up about the first fourth of the movie. It sets up the world, the main characters, their dilemmas and the stakes.

Act Two is the middle half of the movie and is where the character faces obstacles to achieving their goal while changing as a person.

Act Three is roughly the final quarter of the movie and contains the dramatic and climactic resolution to the story. Significant character issues and conflicts are also resolved.

If your listener has questions at the end of your pitch, they will refer back to these general areas using this same terminology.

One caveat – when you pitch you don’t want to sound like you followed a formula. Overdoing screenwriting terminology during the pitch can make it sound like you just finished some screenwriting book last weekend. The buyer wants to hear a story that you’re passionate about, and not one that feels manufactured. So the act breaks should only be signposts, not the focus of your pitch. Don’t forget, you’re telling a story, not building a bridge.

In order to best convey the experience of your movie in a 15-minute verbal form, you’re going to have to let go of some of the plot details and focus on the major story sequences (sometimes called “arcs”). These sequences convey the broad strokes of character and story as they unfold over the course of the pitch.

Act One takes up more time in a pitch because you have to establish the characters, their world, their goals and flaws, as well as the hook that launches the story. This is where the use of act breaks can really help. Without using act breaks your listener may think your first act takes up as much as half your story because of the disproportionate time the set-up can take to pitch.

Despite the extra time that the set-up takes, don’t skip through this stuff too quickly or you risk the listener becoming confused.