

Screenplay Structure the PROPPER Way By John G. Thomas

Valdimir Propp's Narratemes & Morphology of the Folktale

Have you got the makings of a good screenplay with interesting characters and a good story but something's missing? Does it lack energy, conflict and surprise? Are your main characters kind of lost and wandering all over the place? If so, maybe you're missing an important story component called *narratemes*.

Russians love folktales – there are thousands of them! So, way back in the 1920's a Russian writer named Vladimir Propp began to analyze hundreds of them and looked for common structures, themes and story sequences. He compiled his results in a rather unexciting, (out-of-print) book called, "Morphology of the Folktale".

He was able to identify thirty one specific story units which he called, narratemes. You may ask, what's an eighteenth century Russian folktale got to do with your screenplay? Maybe a lot! For example, broad, cinematic epics like the "Star Wars" saga, "Gone With the Wind", or "Lawrence of Arabia" follow Propp's story design almost exactly. Maybe you're not writing an epic and many of Propp's narratemes won't apply to your screenplay, (and several narratemes don't apply to contemporary drama at all) but you can use this as a good starting point and check list of what may be missing.

The first seven narratemes introduce the initial story situation: who, where, when, how and why.

1. **Something's Missing:** Someone is in danger, or something is missing in the lead character's, (hero's) world.
2. **The Warning:** The hero is cautioned: "You are too young, inexperienced or weak." A challenge or warning which ups the dramatic tension and increases the risk.
3. **Violation:** The antagonist disturbs the peace, poses a threat. Can be a real or perceived danger.
4. **Reconnaissance:** The antagonist often wants to know where the children or a precious object are located.
5. **Delivery:** The antagonist obtains useful information which he may use against the protagonist. Not good for the hero.
6. **Trickery:** The antagonist tries to fool the hero in order to steal something of value or threaten someone important to the protagonist.
7. **Complicity:** The hero falls for it hook, line and sinker and unwittingly helps the antagonist.

Now, the story really begins! In folktales the hero would leave on his/her quest by the end of this next sequence of narratemes.

8. **Villainy and Lack:** The antagonist threatens or harms someone important to the hero, or something else which affects others is suddenly missing.
9. **The Challenge:** The hero discovers on his own, or is sometimes informed of the "lack" by a special-purpose character called the "Dispatcher", who requests or makes the hero feel obligated to help.
10. **Counteraction:** The protagonist, (as any hero would) chooses to accept the challenge or assignment despite the clear personal danger.
11. **Departure:** The hero leaves and is, (often accidentally) joined by another character known as the "helper" or "provider".

In the next sequence, the hero sets out on his/her quest. He/she may or not get assistance from the "helper", (which may secretly be working for the antagonist) but the hero's goal is clear at this point.

12. **The Test:** The protagonist is soon challenged, either by the "helper", or someone else needing assistance, (but not necessarily the antagonist).
13. **Reaction:** Our hero responds positively and bravely to the test, but may or may not succeed at this time.
14. **Acquisition:** In a folktale the hero may obtain a magical object as a result of his previous actions. The object may be willingly or unwillingly given to him by a useful character called the "donor". In contemporary dramas, he learns a skill or obtains important information. As a result, other characters may offer help as well.
15. **Transport:** Usually, the hero must travel to another location to reach his goal where he is unwelcomed or will be in danger.
16. **Confrontation:** The hero and antagonist fight. This may not be the climactic battle and the hero may

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just lose this round.

17. **Injury:** The hero is injured, "marked", or set back in his quest, but is not mortally wounded.
18. **Victory:** Our hero beats the bad guy, but his victory may only be temporary and actually strengthen the antagonist.
19. **Resolution:** The initial "lack" may or may not have been fixed, but someone is rescued or something is returned through the direct efforts of the hero.

In many stories this might be the story's end as the hero returns and all is well. However, Propp provides an additional story possibility. Many of his suggestions are optional from now on.

20. **The Hero Returns:** The hero leaves the place he initially went to for his quest and heads back home.
21. **Pursuit:** The hero is chased by the antagonist who tries again to kill him or take back what the hero has obtained.
22. **The Rescue:** The hero narrowly escapes, often through the assistance of the "helper", or due to a new skill or moral realization.
23. **Back Home:** Our hero gets back home but he/she is unrecognized or must hide from danger.
24. **The False Claim:** Because the hero appears absent, others may spread false rumors or question his heroic character and attempt to be the champion or "false hero", (one of my personal favorites!).
25. **The Difficult Task:** This is a direct challenge to the hero who must do something which seems impossible, (i.e., get the golden fleece, fight a dragon, etc.).
26. **Task Performed:** The protagonist proves again his mettle by accomplishing the impossible task.
27. **Recognition:** The protagonist is acknowledged by someone who is important to the hero. He has proved himself.
28. **False Claim is Exposed:** The false claim by the false hero is usually revealed as a direct result of the hero having performed the impossible/heroic task.
29. **Acknowledgement:** The hero is seen in a new light and his heroism is recognized by everyone else.
30. **The Hero Wins:** The bad guy is vanquished by the hero in a climactic battle, usually in physical combat. The false hero is often punished as well.
31. **The Hero Returns:** In folktales the hero usually marries a beautiful princess and ascends the throne. In contemporary screenplays the hero gets the girl and most importantly, his character will have been changed forever.

As a writer, it may seem difficult or even impossible to apply what Mr. Propp discovered all those years ago to your own work. But it's useful to look at a graphic timeline of your own screenplay and see where a modern adaptation of one or more of his suggestions may help.

View John's enlightening deconstruction of "[Lawrence of Arabia](#)" using Propp's paradigm.

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