

Documentary Writer/Producer Anirban Bhattacharya asked SydField.com:

How are Syd Field's methods of screenwriting applicable to documentary storytelling?

What a terrific question! Syd Field's structural Paradigm, along with the methodology he described in his bestseller *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* and its follow-up *The Screenwriters Workbook*, provide a time-tested roadmap to consciously leverage the art of visual storytelling, no matter the content or style of tale being told.

Pretty much by definition, every viable story – fictional or documentary – needs a beginning, middle and end (though not always in a direct, linear progression). Field suggested that the most effective way of approaching this most basic requirement is to start by articulating the narrative landmarks at the **Beginning** and the **End**. By first choosing a visually gripping event to start a story, and even more vitally, by selecting affecting imagery to conclude it, the rest of the storyline can be carefully structured to take the audience on a journey that's both surprising and inevitable.

To accomplish that, Field then guides writers to figure out two major narrative pivots, each of which turn the story in a new direction. For these, he coined the term **Plot Point** (PP): the **First PP** occurs at the end of Act One, the **Second PP** at the end of Act Two. Between these is the **Midpoint**, which roughly defines the halfway mark of the entire story, and bends the action in a less intense, but still meaningful manner. *Please note: the essence of classical, three-act dramatic framing comes to us from the ancient Greek playwright Aristotle; Field was the first to tailor it specifically for screenwriting in guidebook form. See Paradigm Worksheet below.*

Next comes filling in the story material between those five landmarks. Syd Field viewed the contextual thrust of Act One to be **Set-Up** – establishing the world of the story, the characters who inhabit it, and the overriding need/desire/problem that will drive the primary story arc. Act Two, which is about twice as long as Acts One or Three, carries the narrative propulsion of **Confrontation**, in which the character(s) established in Act One are beset by obstacles and conflict that prevents them from getting what they want and/or solving the central problem. Act Three carries the movement of **Resolution**, whether the character(s) succeed or not truly doesn't matter, but the close of the story must contain enough emotional purpose to provide the audience a worthwhile, cathartic experience. *Note: the dramatic goal known as catharsis also comes to us from Aristotle; it's a release of emotional tension that promotes healing and wholeness.*

Focused through the clarifying lens of Syd Field's storytelling techniques, the crafting of functional-and-inspiring narratives for feature films, shorts, television episodes/seasonal arcs and webisodes are all covered, regardless of whether the content is documentary or fictional in nature. Field's structural components and elemental concepts are helpful and applicable to all visually expressed stories.

THE
PARADIGM
WORKSHEET

The Story:

