

The Domino Effect of Desire

In screenplay writing, Desire is what will help form the Spine of your story. From the getgo, in Act 1, this Desire is what drives your Hero in his Ordinary World. The Desire of your Hero is then seized upon by the Inciting Incident of your story, which is the “match that lights the fire” of the Desire. The Inciting Incident is an external event, which will ultimately catapult your Hero with a slightly changed external Desire into the world where most of the story will take place: in Act 2 and Act 3.

In “American Sniper,” it might look something like this: Although it is established early on that the Hero is a sharp shooter, the Hero’s Desire in his Ordinary World is to win rodeos. The World Trade Center is attacked by terrorists and 3,000 people are murdered in one day. The world stands still, in shock. The Hero is not one to stand

still- Islamic terrorists are behind the murders- So the Hero, no longer desirous of winning rodeos, joins the Navy S.E.A.L.S. with a changed Desire: He's going to Iraq to fight the evils of Islamic terrorism. Once in Iraq, his Desire becomes: Fight off the Islamic terrorists while protecting the backs of his fellow soldiers. His Desire to "protect" is intensified by his particular skill set: He is a spot on, fearless sniper. The Desire of the Hero of "American Sniper" stays with him until the end of the story, and the audience is at the edge of their seats during all three acts.

In crafting your story, your character needs to know what he wants. Once he establishes what he wants, he now has his Desire, which is his "end goal." Unlike the Desire embedded in an emotional yearning, the Desire your Hero wants is an external Desire. Knowing what the external Desire of your story is will result in your audience rooting for the

Hero. The Desire will be the force that creates the Spine of your story; it creates focus; it gives clarity to your story.

Examples of a Hero's external Desire: To win the gold medal in the Olympics; to get the girl; to reach the top of Mt. Everest; to get a divorce; to win custody to see his children; to find the person who murdered his wife; to discover a cure for cancer; to protect a witness from a murderer; to slay 10 dragons who are keeping his family hostage; to consummate an illicit affair; to take over a family mafia business; to get to the truth behind child abuse by pedophiles.

However, just like "real life," it is a tough challenge to figure out one's Desire. So the Hero's Desire in the beginning of the story might be: To drink and play the rodeo circuit: "American Sniper"; to get into trouble with the ex-wife which will preclude getting child custody rights: "Mrs. Doubtfire"; to stay as far away from a Mafia family as

possible: “The Godfather”; to bury the truth about pedophiles destroying children’s lives because it goes against tradition: “Spotlight”; to ignore the love of his life for a more shallow goal of making money: “Jerry Maguire.”

Therefore, the Hero’s Desire is not clear in the beginning of your story. The Desire that your Hero has in the first few pages of the story will get “ramped up” after the Inciting Incident, which comes about 10, 11, or 12 pages into the story. The Desire doesn’t completely change, but rather, it takes a “bend in the road.” By the end of Act 1, or about 30 pages into the story, the Hero will have the beginnings of a Plan and also a more clearly defined Desire.

The “Running Start”

Working within the 3-Act Structure of a screenplay, the writer has to be aware of many structural plot points that work cohesively to craft a great story. The Main Character/Hero/Protagonist will start off in

most genres with "A Running Start," as opposed to a "Community Start" (characters dancing at a wedding, etc.), or a "Slow Start" (a narrator whom we are mystified as to his identity).

Therefore, with the "Running Start," the Hero will usually be introduced in the first few pages of Act 1. But wait!! Exceptions:

An example would be the Crime Genre, in which the crime is enacted in the first few pages of Act 1. Also, in the Crime Genre, the crime could be the Inciting Incident. This is the incident that acts as a catalyst for the Hero to engage in the action of the story. The Inciting Incident in Crime Genre and other genres will usually occur on page 10, 11, or 12, or 10, 11, or 12 minutes into the story. To sum up, the Hero will start off with "A Running Start" oftentimes after the crime, and the crime will occur in the first few pages of the story or on p. 10, 11, or 12 of the story.

In "Lincoln Lawyer," a Redemption Story, Micky Haller is introduced to the crime after he has come face to face with the Main Opponent of the story. At this point in time, there is no REVEAL to the Hero or to the audience that Micky Haller is looking into the eyes of a psychopath. The face to face moment occurs at the "Inciting Incident," on page 12. And then the Hero will have a meeting with the Main Opponent and his mother and their family lawyer, and the crime the Main Opponent is accused of is related in Flashback. The Hero is off to a "Running Start" to find the murderer.

In "Witness," the crime is committed as part of the "Inciting Incident moment," on p. 13, and this crime is witnessed by a little Amish boy in the bathroom of a train station. The Hero, Detective John Book, is introduced after the crime has been committed, right after the Inciting Incident. John Book is now off to a "Running Start" that will take him into Amish country to hide the boy until Book can confront the murderer, a dirty cop.

However, in "The Fugitive," the crime is in motion on the opening page of the story. The Hero is taken into custody because he is in his home, covered with blood, with scratches on his neck when the police

arrive after his dying wife has called 9-1-1. The Hero, Dr. Richard Kimble, is in the interrogation room of the police department and the crime is slowly revealed with Cross-Cut Flashback technique. The Hero is then off to a "Running Start" from the moment he is sentenced in court to lethal injection for the murder of his wife, which he did not commit.

The "Running Start" is a preferred way to open a story because the Hero is going for his Goal/Desire from the getgo. This ramps up the Narrative Drive of the story and it's what keeps viewers on the edge of their seats.