



MasterClass

Aaron Sorkin

Teaches Screenwriting



9. RULES OF A STORY

"Rules are what make
art beautiful."
—Aaron Sorkin

SUBCHAPTERS

- Learn the Rules of Story
- The Rulebook: *Aristotle's Poetics*
- Be a Diagnostician
- The Only Rules Are Rules of Drama

CHAPTER REVIEW

Dismiss the idea that art is not a place for rules. Art, much like music and sports, is made much more enjoyable by certain rules. Learn those rules by watching films, reading screenplays, deconstructing their parts, and putting them back together. Read Aaron's bible for storytelling: *Aristotle's Poetics*.

Become a diagnostician. Watch TV shows, plays, and movies with the screenplay in your lap. When something doesn't work, figure out why it doesn't work. Did it break one of Aristotle's rules?

Don't confuse the rules of drama with the rules invented by people about what stories or characters are culturally appropriate or popular enough to appear on TV. Society and cultural norms shift. The rules of drama are the only principles you need to concern yourself with.

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Included in the appendix of Aaron's Class Guide is a "Rules of Drama Cheat Sheet," outlining *Aristotle's Poetics*. Read the original text, as provided by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- There are several online resources where you can find TV and film screenplays. The New York Film Academy provides a list of ten websites.

ASSIGNMENT

- Pick a movie to watch tonight. Critically look at why the movie works or doesn't work. If you find yourself using snarky terms, remember, that doesn't help you diagnose the script. Keep a journal and write down what works about your five favorite movies and what doesn't work about your five least favorite movies.

APPENDIX.

ARISTOTLE'S POETICS CHEAT SHEET

RULES OF DRAMA

- *Drama Is Imitation:* Drama is not “real life.” In other words, the emotions an audience feels when they’re watching a good dramatic work aren’t exactly what they’d feel encountering the same scenarios in real life. Learning how to imitate life in a way that keeps your audience interested and emotionally involved is the secret to good dramatic storytelling. As Aaron says, “People don’t speak in dialogue... people’s lives don’t play out in a series of scenes that form a narrative.”
- *Drama Is Not History:* Real life is full of confusion, chaos, and contradiction—good storytelling isn’t. Don’t ever let a dedication to “the facts” get in the way of crafting a tight, understandable story. Relate this to how Aaron writes with the “more important truth” when he’s incorporating research.
- *Drama Is Action:* Stories are more than just descriptions of interesting people or interesting places—they have to be descriptions of events. One way of testing if your story is appropriately “active” is by asking yourself: Do my characters undergo a major change (e.g., from happy to sad, broken to stable, etc.) over the course of the story?
- *Stories Have Harmony and Rhythm:* Dialogue shouldn’t sound like real conversation and scenes shouldn’t feel like interactions in real life. Almost always they’ll be snappier, more condensed, and more focused. They might also be funnier or more emotionally charged. Choosing certain phrases over others because of the way they sound, or their length, or their emotional resonance are important choices that give a script its harmony and rhythm and often separate the good from the great.
- *Genre:* In a tragedy, your main character should undergo a major change of fortune—almost always from good to bad, happy to sad. In comedy, even though your characters have defects, their defects should never wind up being painful or destructive. Tragic characters have to suffer. Comic characters make it through unscathed.

STRUCTURE

- *Good Stories Have a Beginning, Middle, and End:* Aristotle was the first to formulate this now well-worn formula. He put it this way: “A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end.” In other words, your audience should be able to watch your story without being distracted with wondering what happened before the story started, what more happened after it ended, or how the characters got from the beginning to the end.
- *A Plot Should Be Serious, Complete, and of a Certain Magnitude:* The plot shouldn’t be made up of ridiculous and unlikely episodes. It shouldn’t wander or leave actions unfinished, and it shouldn’t be too long and lofty, or too small and unimportant.

APPENDIX.

ARISTOTLE'S POETICS CHEAT SHEET

STRUCTURE (CONT'D)

- *Unify Your Plot:* A unified plot consists of one central action and nothing more. Aristotle's test of this was to ask of every element of the story (every scene, line of dialogue): If this was gone, would the story still function? If the answer's always "no"—you've written a unified plot. Relate this back to Aaron's advice on rewriting and "killing your darlings"—chip away at anything that isn't related to the main conflict.
- *One Thing Should Lead to Another:* Each element of a plot—each scene, each line—should come out of what preceded it and lead to what follows. Aristotle thinks the worst mistake you can make in plotting is to have episodes "succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence." Remember, each scene has a purpose—it should move the story forward.
- *Cause and Effect, Not Coincidence:* Good stories are driven by the actions of their characters, not by coincidences or forces outside of the main action. Aristotle cautioned against the use of *deus ex machina*—where a hero is saved by a stroke of good luck that has no relation to their own activities over the course of the drama (many films and TV shows fall prey to this sin; keep your eyes peeled for them).
- *Not Too Big or too Small:* A good story should be easy enough for an audience to digest in one sitting—large enough that they have to pay attention but not so large that they lose track of crucial details before the story's done. Remember to not lose or confuse the audience, as Aaron details in "The Audience" chapter.
- *Complex Plots Are Best:* The two elements of complex plots are reversals and recognitions. Reversals occur when a character's intentions result in unexpected and opposite outcomes. For recognition, the character is destroyed not by what happens but by the knowledge of what really happened. Recognition scenes usually come as surprises to the hero and the audience. And remember, as Aaron says, the best type of reversal happens when the audience doesn't see it coming.
- *Probable Impossibilities Are Better Than Improbable Possibilities* (or as Aaron calls it, a "possible improbability"): If you're wondering whether a scene or an element of a story is too ridiculous for your audience, don't ask, "Could it happen?" Instead ask, "Would it happen?"
- *Use Your Imagination to Make Things Credible:* An audience is very perceptive when they're imaginatively engaged in a story—a good writer should be too, so make sure you don't leave any glaring errors for the audience to pick up on.
- *Stay Away From Narration:* Remembering that drama is imitation, stay away from "telling" your audience too much. Remember to show the audience what a character wants, rather than telling them.

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ARISTOTLE'S POETICS CHEAT SHEET

CHARACTER

- *Anti-Hero*: A character who does not necessarily have virtuous or villainous qualities but is able to behave heroically if the opportunity arises. As Aaron says, when writing anti-heroes, treat them as heroes and relate to them as much as you can to write a believable character.
- *Character Is Action*: An audience gets the deepest sense of your characters by watching what they do. A vivid main character must undertake an important action—this will be, of course, the main action of your plot.
- *Good Dialogue Comes From the Characters' Choices*: Audiences come to understand characters in the context of their choices—when they're moving toward or away from things. When engaging characters talk, they exhibit preferences—strong ones and clear ones—they don't just relate facts. These preferences are grounded in the tactics they use to overcome obstacles.
- *Create Characters That Make an Audience Feel*: The audience should be able to feel pity for a tragic hero—that means you have to create a situation that the audience can understand in the context of their own lives.
- *Good Characters Are Complicated*: In good drama, a hero undergoes a major change of fortune. If you want this change of fortune to make an audience feel deep emotions, certain types of heroes work better than others. The most emotionally engaging movement, according to Aristotle, is when a good man with certain shortcomings meets tremendous suffering. A flawed hero is someone we can all relate to, and his downfall will fill us with pity and fear.
- *Credible, Consistent Characters*: Credible characters follow, more or less, universal rules of probability. Again, if you're wondering if you've written a credible character, don't ask, "Could that person exist?" Instead ask, "Would the audience be likely to understand a person like that?"

NOTES

- Full Text of Aristotle's Poetics, provided by The Internet Classics Archive.
- *Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters: Storytelling Secrets From the Greatest Mind in Western Civilization* (2002)

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