

From Screenwriting to Copywriting: Understanding Structure

By Mathes Jones

A few years ago, I took my first comedy screenwriting class from Steve Mazur, who wrote the hit movie, *Liar Liar*, starring Jim Carrey.

When you meet Steve, he doesn't strike you as the class clown ... in fact, he's an attorney by background ... a prosecutor, no less!

And *Liar Liar* isn't his only comedy. He's written or co-written a number of them, including *Heartbreakers* and *The Little Rascals*.

Sure, he has a sense of humor, don't get me wrong.

But he's not a stand-up comic ... like Jim Carrey.

So, what is it about Steve's writing that gets the laughs? And how does he produce "funny" time and time again?

It's simple ... through something called structure.

Understanding how it works for you can not only make you a better screenwriter, but a stronger direct-response copywriter, as well.

Before we delve more into structure and what it can do to strengthen your writing for both the screen and for your copy, let me define copywriting as "any writing that offers a product or service for sale."

In its essence, direct-response copywriting tells a story that persuades your reader to act. Sounds a lot like screenwriting, doesn't it?

The Nature of Structure

Structure is the anatomy, the bones, the skeleton of the thing you're seeking to build ... or to write.

It's not a formula, although there are formulas in both sorts of writing. A formula is more about the ingredients, the methodology.

Structure is the DNA ...

The way I think about these two is this: Let's say you want to make a cake. That's the structure. The type of cake you want to make depends on a recipe, or a formula. If you change formulas, you can still have a cake. But if you change structure, you

don't.

Same with writing ...

If you use a certain structure, you create a screenplay ... a different structure and you create a "sales letter" used to present features and benefits in a persuasive way to a potential buyer, or prospect.

Yet, both structures are designed to tell – and sell – an emotional story.

And, as a screenwriter, you know that every good story has this ...

The Key Function of Structure

Let's look at what Michael Hauge says about structure in his book, *Writing Screenplays That Sell*:

"Structure consists of the events in the plot of a screenplay and their position relative to one another. In a properly structured story, the right events occur in the right sequence to elicit maximum emotional involvement ..."

Hmmm ... not much different than what copywriting genius, Mark Morgan Ford (writing under his former pen name, Michael Masterson), says about structure:

"It's what to say when, what to put where, and how to direct your reader without his being aware of it.

When you understand what copywriting is about, you understand what we call the 'invisible architecture' of a piece: those things that grab a person's attention, whether he is reading a book or an article or is watching a movie.

An ordinary writer doesn't pay attention to the things that people really care about, because he's writing about what HE cares about. But in copywriting, you learn to write about what your reader wants to know ... wants to hear ... wants to feel.

In doing that, you can give him a very good feeling.

Whether you're writing fiction, screenplays, or magazine articles, you are able to do something that's invisible to other writers but very obvious to you."

So, as you can see, it's really structure that has the power to create a particular emotional response.

Going back to the screenwriting class I mentioned earlier, this is why Steve Mazur doesn't have to be a super funny guy to write successful comedy.

Because he understands that comedy isn't the ability to tell a joke (though that can be funny and sometimes useful).

It's actually the ability to follow a structure, in this case comedy, that when done well, evokes laughter.

Practice, Practice, Practice

AWAI's Don Mahoney says, "It takes a while for a new copywriter to get a feel for exactly how that invisible structure works – how to dig it out of a successful promotion and how to use it in your own."

Not much getting around it ... writing a compelling, emotional story takes practice.

There are a lot of moving parts, you could say ...

First, you have to learn each element that makes up the order and structure.

For example, in a three act screenplay, the essential elements are the setup, the aftermath, turning points, resolution and climax.

In a promotional sales letter, they're things like an attention-grabbing headline, benefits that stir emotion, testimonials from people who love the product, and a compelling offer.

But that's not *everything* ...

You also have to know how to create the rhythm of the underlying, invisible structure.

And the only way to do that is by, yep, more practice.

Lots more ...

So, besides reading and studying, here's a tip: in screenwriting, copy screenplays ... and in copywriting, copy successful sales letters.

By hand ... the old-fashioned way ...

I'm not talking about plagiarizing here. Nope, just writing by hand for your own learning purposes.

Because, when you write it out longhand, something happens inside your brain and you begin to internalize the rhythm subconsciously.

A fellow copywriter, Conrad Hall says, "Nothing will propel your understanding faster than the simple exercise of hand copying successful letters."

By the way, this is the entire point of the very first exercise in *AWAI's Accelerated Program for Six-Figure Income* – where you write out a successful sales letter longhand several times ... not just copying it blindly ... but really connecting the dots and paying attention to the message and format.

It's powerful, and it works.

(Yes, with screenplays, too ...)

The Bottom Line of Structure

It doesn't matter if you're writing screenplays or direct-response copy, mastering structure will allow you to write with greater ease and confidence.

If you don't have it down, you won't get read.

It's that simple.

And ... if you don't get read, nothing gets sold ... not your screenplay, not your product.

Ultimately, as Michael Hauge says, "All commercially successful movies have two things in common: good word-of-mouth and repeat viewers. You won't achieve either if the audience doesn't find the ending of the movie satisfying and emotionally fulfilling."

This isn't just true in the movie business ...

It's *absolutely* true in the copywriting business!

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