

SCRIPT HACKS: How To Express A Script Theme In 3 Acts

By: **Alex Bloom** | June 30, 2016

We all know every good screenplay should have a well-formulated theme — a sense of the story’s DNA and what it’s really at heart about — but there are many different interpretations out there as to what a theme actually is.

Some people think that if you take a basic emotion such as love, revenge, or desire, you have a solid script theme. Or that the theme of *The Sixth Sense* is Guilt vs. Redemption, but these approaches will often fail to help you write a great screenplay because they’re just static emotions that don’t go anywhere.

Emotion can form the basis of many themes, but a writer needs to elaborate on them before they can express the true thematic idea they want to get across.

A much better way to approach a script’s theme is as an argument.

A proposed argument, such as “You need to believe in yourself if you want to reach your true potential” (*The Matrix*), or “You need to learn to experience joy from the small things in life if you want to be happy” (*It’s a Wonderful Life*), are arguments that have already been answered in the writer’s mind before writing the script.

In this sense, “theme” could actually be referred to as The Answer. Or more specifically, your answer to an important question about life.

The next step is to frame this thematic argument around the [journey of your protagonist](#) through the three acts of the screenplay. So, once you’ve formulated an argument that resonates with you, and settled on the answer to a question found within that argument, then it’s a case of harnessing it to your protagonist’s character arc within the script’s three-act structure.

Screenplay Theme Expressed In Three Acts

Here’s how to [harness your screenplay theme](#) to your protagonist’s arc as they journey through the three acts, followed by three examples from well-known movies.

Act One

The protagonist is unaware of the theme/The Answer. Even though they don’t know it, it’s their ignorance of The Answer that’s the reason their world is unhappy, unstable, unfulfilled, chaotic or all of these things. It’s not necessarily circumstances that upset a character, it’s the manner in which they react to them.

Act Two

The protagonist begins to confront obstacles and/or the antagonist, and in doing so to gather experiences that hint at The Answer. When thinking about the second act, it helps to define the purpose of the experiences the protagonist will have. The purpose is to instruct the protagonist in the ways of The Answer, and circumstances should force them to behave as if they’re beginning to be affected by it and coming to understand it.

Act Three

Armed with faith in The Answer, the protagonist commits to a final course of action, no matter what the cost. This matter of faith is essential and the protagonist must first believe in it in order to receive the reward at the script’s climax. Once the protagonist finally risks it all to live a life that’s close to The Answer, order is restored and stability returns. (Or not, in the case of a movie with a “down” ending, such as *The Shining*, *Se7en* or *The Wrestler*.)

This perspective can provide a useful sense of limitation when crafting sequences for a story. After all, you could write practically anything during a screenplay, but you’re trying to write *the right thing* — the thing that ties in thematically with the story.

When a [script reader](#) says “this scene, character, or moment feels inorganic to the story” what they really mean is “this scene, character, or moment is disconnected from the development of the script’s theme.” And what that means is that no matter how clever or original or thought-provoking the material is, it’s ceased to be about something. When that happens, return to your theme and The Answer you want your protagonist to come to understand.

Three Script Theme Movie Examples

Here are three examples of the protagonist’s thematic journey through three act structure to illustrate what I mean:

1. Bruce Almighty

Theme: *Learn to be happy with what you've got and to realize own strengths if you want a happy life.*

Act One Unawareness of Theme: Bruce wants to get ahead by any means necessary. His ruthless ambition means he can't see what he's got — Grace, and an imperfect but pretty nice life.

Act Two Experiences That Hint At The Answer: Bruce is given the power by God to get whatever he wants. He gets the anchor job, becomes successful, and well-liked. But the power goes to his head, and he loses Grace.

Act Three Faith In The Answer: Bruce lets the world downhill, then realizes it's not as easy as it looks being God. He tries to get Grace back and this gives him The Answer — to be happy with what you've got and realize your own strengths.

2. The Apartment

Theme: *Standing up for your own integrity and principles can eventually bring tremendous rewards in the long run.*

Act One Unawareness of Theme: Bud lets other people walk all over him. He asks Fran out but doesn't get anywhere and ends up giving his apartment key to his boss, Sheldrake.

Act Two Experiences That Hint At The Answer: Bud gets stood up by Fran, but also gets a new office and a promotion. He continues to make headway with Fran and ends up saving her from suicide, but she still loves Sheldrake.

Act Three Faith In The Answer: Bud stops letting his co-workers use his apartment and takes the rap from Fran's brother for her attempted suicide. To his surprise, he gets promoted again by Sheldrake for helping out with Fran, but is distraught that she's finally going to be with him. He denies Sheldrake access to his apartment and quits — having decided to become a "human being." Learning this, Fran decides she wants to be with him.

3. American Beauty

Theme: *Material possessions and "success" are not what's important in life because true beauty is to be found in the simple things.*

Act One Unawareness of Theme: Lester feels unfulfilled in his life, his marriage, his daughter, his work. His family think of him as a loser. He's going through a mid-life crisis and has lost any meaning to his life - that is until he meets cheerleader, Angela.

Act Two Experiences That Hint At The Answer: In *American Beauty*, each story beat tells us something more about Lester's desire to change his meaningless life. He tells off his boss, quits his job, tries to rediscover his happy youth by taking a job in a burger bar, tries to reawaken his love life with his wife, tries drugs with the next door neighbor and builds up his body to impress a cheerleader.

Act Three Faith In The Answer: Lester finds and affirms his self-worth by choosing not to sleep with Angela. The irony is that after he's changed his life and given it meaning, he's killed, meaning he only discovers true beauty in life after death.

Applying a theme to your screenplay should become easier once you meld it like this to your protagonist's journey through the three acts, and think of it in terms of their unawareness of The Answer, the experiences that challenge this unawareness, and their final acceptance of the theme when they find The Answer.