

# What is a Beat Sheet?

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*A beat sheet is a form of outlining that many screenwriters and authors use to map out their story.*

It is an outlining technique. Beat sheets are comprised of short bullet points rather than full sentences. These bullet points are your beats, or the main pivotal and emotional points in your screenplay.

A beat sheet is a tool that writers use to help them plan and sequence their story.

Rather than crafting full sentences, you use bullet points to outline the action taking place at pivotal points in your plot. These *beats* can then be used as a basis to craft your outline.

In a screenplay or teleplay, a beat is a moment that propels the story forward and compels the viewer to take stock of what could happen next. Each scene may be comprised of several different beats. Some story beats are subtle, while others are obvious.

The goal is to gather together all of these beats into one place and to organize them in a logical, impactful way that will further guide the direction and structure of your screenplay.

At its core, beat sheets are really simple – they're just a list of major plot events and important frames to help make writing a little easier.

## **Benefits and Importance of a Beat Sheet**

A beat sheet can function as a skeleton for your story. Most other types of outlines are less structured than a beat sheet and less all-encompassing of the

story. Most outlines are general and don't give as much clue as to the drama and emotion within.

Beat sheets are specifically for storytelling within screen and their set up is reflective of that.

- In short, beat sheets are made to cover all the major scenes that a great screenplay needs and they go beyond the traditional Three Act Structure.
- They are to help guide you through everything from the opening scene to the inciting event to the eventual rock-bottom to the final triumph.
- Beat sheets are also useful because they help you fully inhabit the world you've created.
- It no longer seems like a big, abstract concept and rather like a real universe that you can work with and in.
- Your characters also then have substance.

### **The major beats to create the best framework for your screenplay.**

Every screenwriter approaches their beat sheet a bit differently, but in general, the goal is to separate your story into either three or five acts, and move the story through those acts with beats. Here are 12 story beats to incorporate into your beat sheet.

**Opening image.** A short description of the very first moment or event people will see. Strive for an exciting opening that makes people lean in and sets the tone for the story you're telling.

**Introduction.** One or more beats in which your characters and setting come into clear focus. Who is the main character? What does she want? What is holding her back from getting it?

**Statement of theme.** What is your film about? This is the opportunity to show the audience.

**Catalyst.** This is the moment in which the main character either actively sets out to achieve her goals, or is forced to go down the path plotted for her. Think of the most extreme thing that can happen to your characters, make it happen, and go from there.

**Debate.** However, even great characters have their doubts. The main character might need to confer with other characters, or do some soul-searching, before embarking on her journey.

**B-Story or B-Plot.** The best time to introduce a secondary plot is roughly towards the end of the first act. The audience will now be familiar with the main character, her world, and her plight, and therefore should be more invested in the other goings-on that may affect the story. The B-Plot often carries the first act through to the second act.

**New characters.** As the main character goes through the story, she will likely meet other characters who help or hurt her. This opportunity for one or more new characters, which should come towards the first half of the second act, allows a writer to deepen the conflict and increase tension in the narrative.

**Midpoint.** Exactly halfway through your story. The characters have made their decisions, and now reality sets in.

**Low point.** Just as as the main character seems to be within reach of her goal, something happens that derails her progress or makes her question her journey. A sense of despair or confusion may set in.

**Climax.** This is the big moment in which the action spikes and everything that you've set up before now comes to a head. In a traditional action film, the climax might be a big chase or fight scene. In short, the climax should show your main character just within reach of her goal.

**Beginning of the end.** Once the main character has reached her goal (or come up short), the story begins to wind down. Any secondary storylines should start coming to a close.

**Finale.** The final scene viewers will see. This should cap off the theme of the story, and leave your audience with a sense of how your protagonist has grown through the events of the film.

## Theme in Script Writing

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Your story's theme is what your story is really about.

If someone asks what your film's about, you might tell them the logline, which is probably a very short summary of the plot. *It's A Wonderful Life* is about a suicidal businessman who is visited by an angel and shown what the world would have been like if he hadn't existed.

The theme is your point of view that you wish to express about a specific aspect of a specific subject, whether it's love, money, greed.

Theme is often referred to as the moral message of the story. *The Wizard of Oz* isn't just a fun adventure story about a girl who visits the magical land of Oz. It uses that plot to say something about the human condition, to ask questions about whether the grass is greener on the other side of the fence (or in this case, over the rainbow) or whether, instead, there's no place like home.

### WHY IS THEME IMPORTANT?

It's this innate desire to find meaning in events and actions that means that a script which has a theme and something to say is a more satisfying read than one that does not. And if you're writing on spec the first job of your script is to move the reader to action. Your script may have an interesting premise or compelling characters but if it's not 'about' anything, if there isn't a deeper meaning, it can lead to a pass.

A script with something to say is much more likely to get your writing noticed.

A script with a strong theme, with something to say, not only gets you attention as an exciting new writing talent, but it also delivers what both commissioners and managers are looking for from a script.

Theme not only gives a story a deeper meaning but it also tends to give actors something to get their teeth into. And the number one thing managers look for in a screenplay that they can sell is 'actor bait'.

### DRAMATISING YOUR THEME WITHOUT PREACHING

There's a fine line between having something to say and preaching at your audience.

To avoid making your script feel too heavy-handed or polemical, try expressing your theme as a moral question rather than statement. For example, rather than 'money can't buy you happiness' you might instead have your script ask 'can money buy you happiness?'

This might feel like a very small, subtle shift in your thinking but it can have a dramatic effect on the choices you make in the writing.

Whether you know what you want to say from the outset, or tease out your theme as you develop your project, a script with a clear theme, with something to say, will help it stand out from the crowd.