

Television News:

Story Structure & Scripts

By Agaba Issa Mugabo

TV Story Structure

- ◆ You have several options when it comes to the structure of your story.

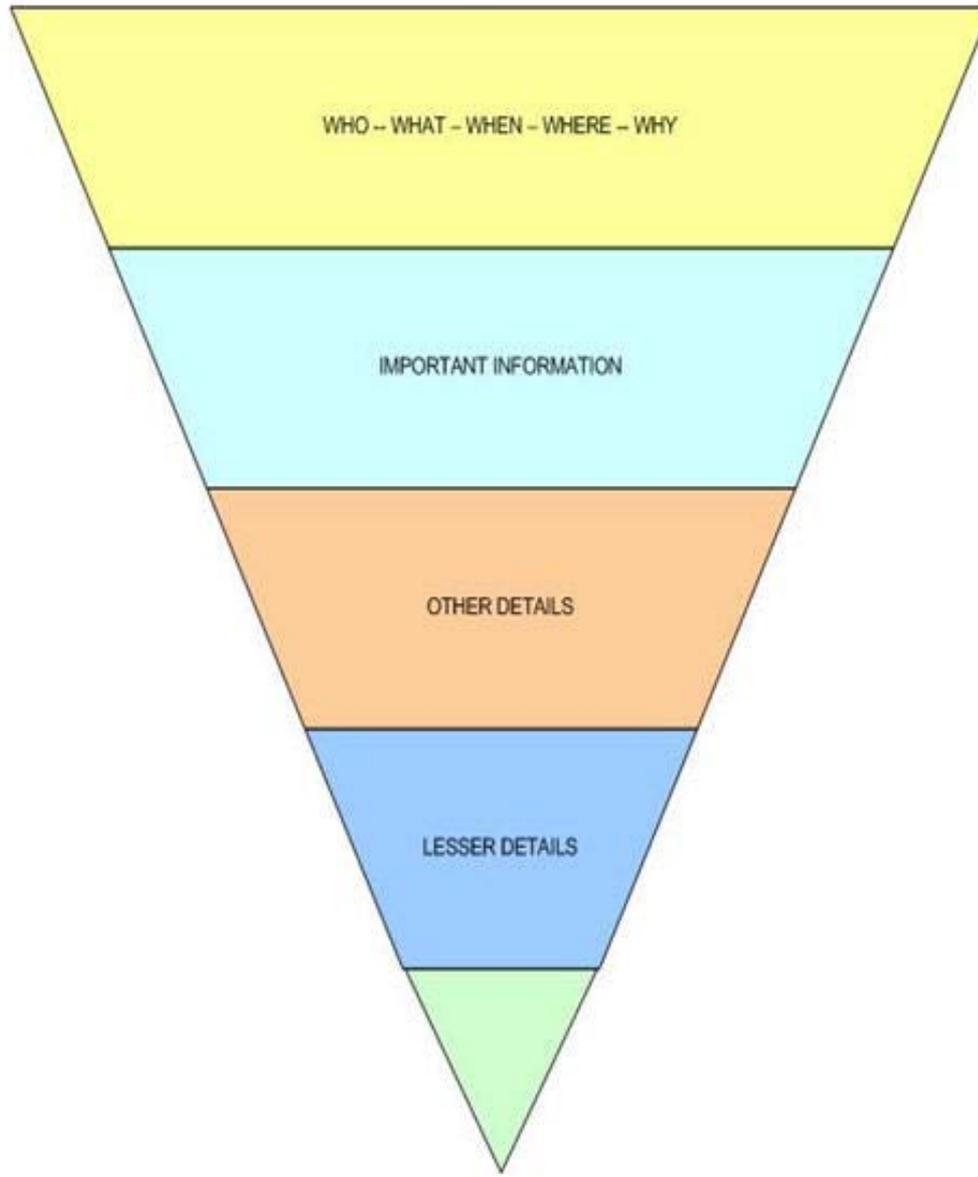
- ◆ You can choose a chronological order, where you present the key events in your story as they occurred.

- ◆ It is more likely, though, that you will use one of the three traditional news forms:
 - ① the inverted pyramid,
 - ② the narrative or
 - ③ the hourglass.

Inverted Pyramid

- ❖ The most popular structure for news stories is the inverted pyramid.
- ❖ In the inverted pyramid, the information is arranged in descending order of importance.
- ❖ The most important material is placed at the beginning of the story, and less important material follows.
- ❖ The inverted pyramid format turns traditional storytelling on its head. In a short story or novel, the most important moment – the climax - typically comes near the very end. But in news writing the most important moment is right at the start
- ❖ Succeeding paragraphs explain and support the lead.

Inverted Pyramid News Writing Style



Inverted Pyramid: Origin

- The format was developed during the Civil War.
- Newspaper correspondents covering that war's great battles relied on telegraph machines to transmit their stories back to their newspapers' offices.
- But often saboteurs would cut the telegraph lines, so reporters learned to transmit the most important information – France defeats Germany, for instance – at the very start of the transmission to make sure it got through successfully.
- The news writing format developed then has served reporters well ever since

Inverted Pyramid: An Example

✧ Let's say you're writing a story about a fire in which two people are killed and their house is burned down.

✧ In your reporting you've gathered a lot of details including the victims' names, The address of their home, what time the blaze broke out, etc.



An Example Cont'd...

- ✧ Obviously the most important information is the fact that two people died in the fire. That's what you want at the top of your story.
- ✧ **Other details** – the names of the deceased, the address of their home, when the fire occurred – should certainly be included. But they should be placed lower down in the story, not at the very top.
- ✧ And the least important information - things like what the weather was like at the time, or the color of the home - should be at the very bottom of the story.

Inverted Pyramid- Advantages

- ❖ The inverted pyramid is popular because it still serves readers well by telling them quickly what happened.
- ❖ It tells them quickly what they want to know.
- ❖ It also serves the reporter by forcing them to sharpen their news judgment, to identify and rank the most important elements of the story. i.e It forces the reporter to identify key elements in the story

Inverted Pyramid-disadvantages

- 1 Although it delivers the most important news first, it does not encourage good writing.
- 2 Many times stories do not have an ending crafted by the writer; they simply end.
- 3 There is no suspense.
- 4 Reporters tend to lose interest, time and energy.
- 5 Writing in the second half of the story is casual at best, and poor at worst.

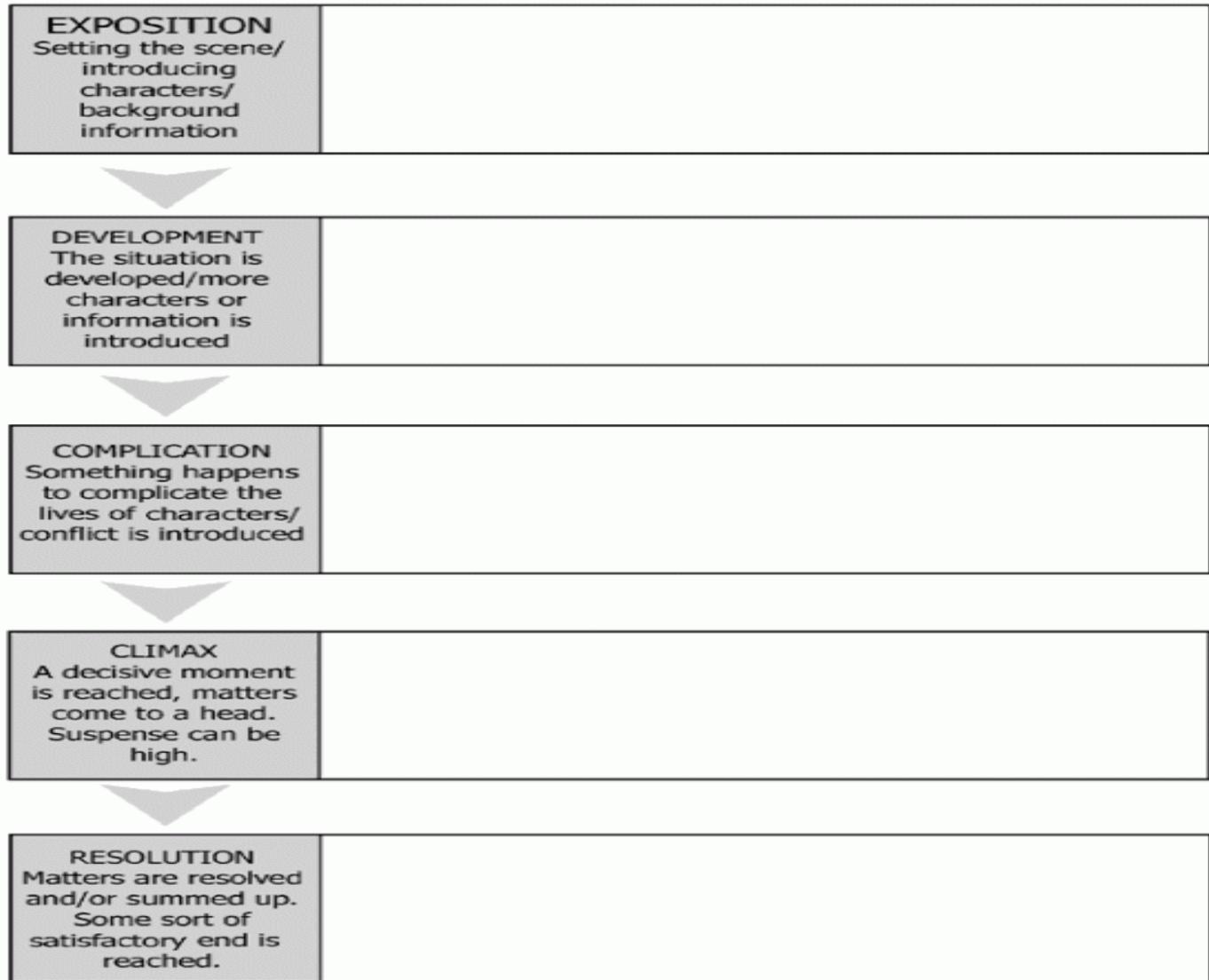
Narrative Structure

- ✓ One alternative to the inverted pyramid is narration or story telling.
- ✓ Narration uses scenes, anecdotes and dialogue to build to a climax.
- ✓ People are prominent in the story, and they are responsible for the action.
- ✓ The story has a beginning, middle and end.
- ✓ Quotations sound like real speech.
- ✓ The words and actions of the characters reveal motives.

Narrative structure

- 1) **A story or a narrative is an account of events.** But it is not just any sort of account of any events. It is a selection and ordering of events into a meaningful pattern. More simply put, narrative structure is about the the ways in which a story has been structured or put together.
- 2) **It is consequential sequence of events.** Its typical structure begins with a setting of the scene and introduction of characters in an initial situation, a state of relative equilibrium.
- 3) It then proceeds to a disruption of this equilibrium, with the emergence of some sort of catalyst for the eruption of tension, conflict, misunderstanding, contradiction, mystery or loss.
- 4) There follows an exploration of the causes, implications or consequences. Then come various attempts at resolution, which build toward a climax, a high point of tension, bringing revelation or catharsis.
- 5) It ends with a resolution in a new state of relative equilibrium.

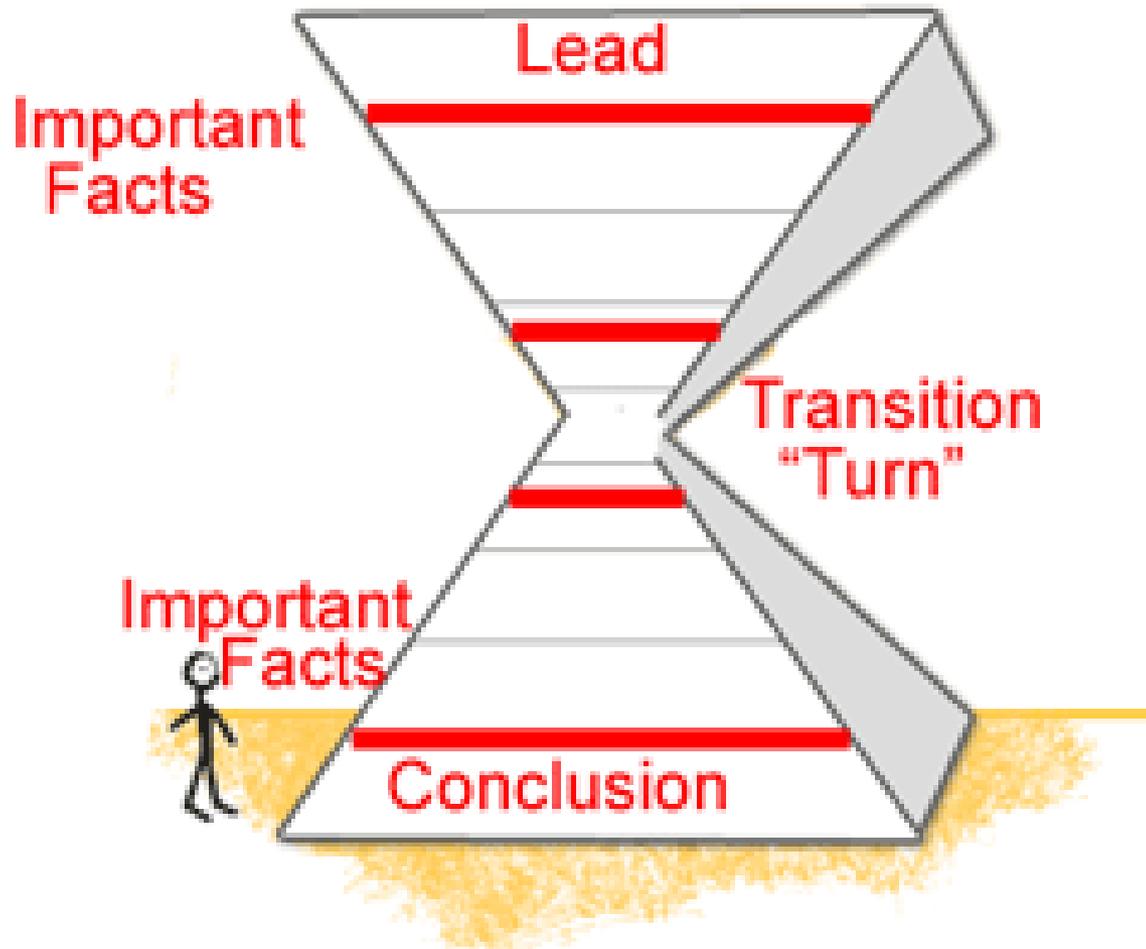
Narrative Structure



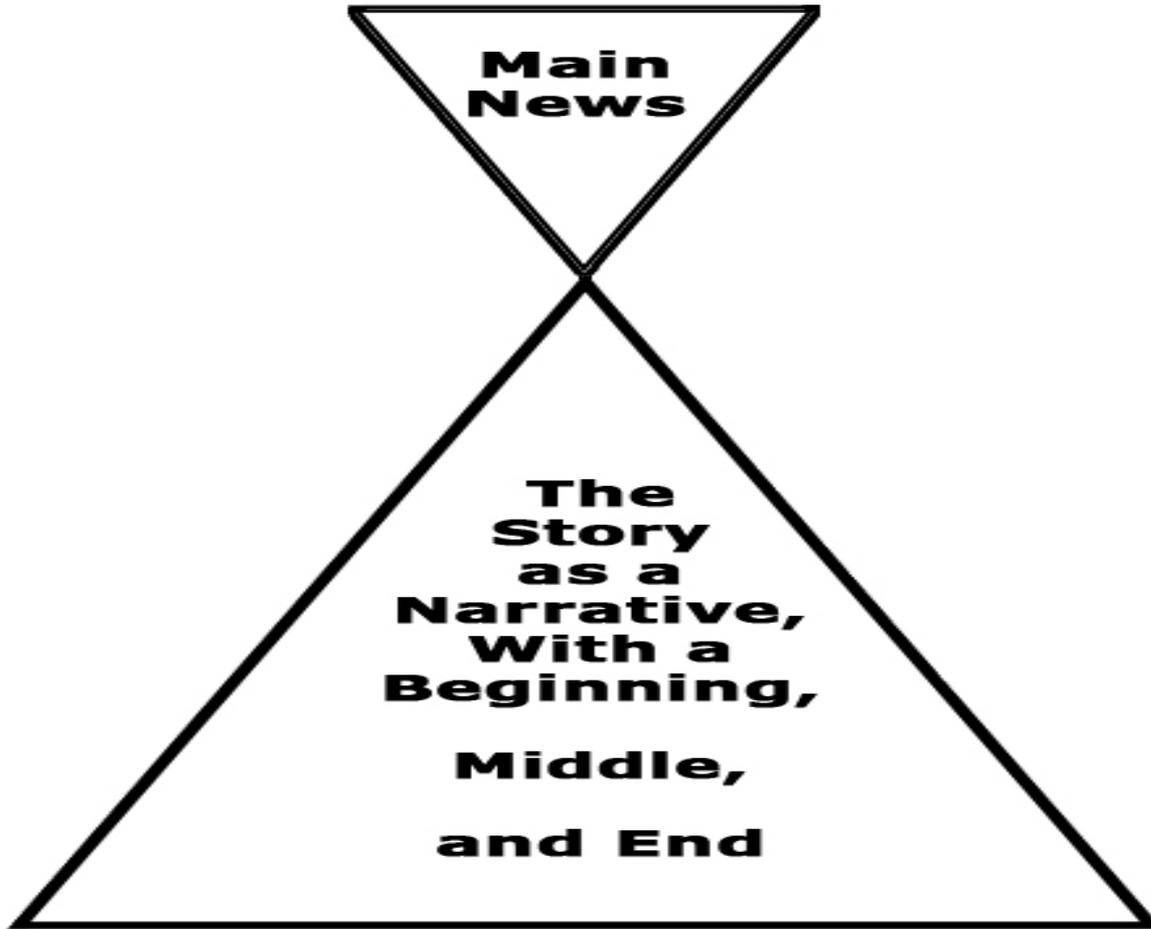
Hourglass Structure

- ❑ What if you have news to break – but also a great story to tell?
- ❑ This combines some of the best elements of both the inverted pyramid and the narrative.
- ❑ It consists of three parts: a top, which tells the news quickly; the turn, a nimble transition; and the narrative, a chronological retelling of events.
- ❑ The hourglass works well with police stories, courtroom dramas and other incidents that lend themselves to chronological narration.

Hourglass



Hourglass



THE TOP

- ✧ Here you deliver the news in a summary lead, followed by three or four paragraphs that answer the reader's most pressing questions.
- ✧ In the top you give the basic news, enough to satisfy a time-pressed reader. You report the story in its most concise form.
- ✧ If all that is read is the top, the reader is still informed. Because it's limited to four to six paragraphs, the top of the story should contain only the most significant information.

THE TURN

- **THE TURN:** The transition is short, alerting the reader that the news report is shifting to storytelling form and indicating the sources for the chronicle to come.
- Here you signal the reader that a narrative, usually chronological, is beginning.
- Usually, the turn is a transitional phrase that contains attribution for the narrative that follows: **according to police, eyewitnesses described the event this way, the shooting unfolded this way, law enforcement sources and neighbors agree.**

BEHIND THE HOURGLASS

- ✧ In the top globe, break your news in inverted-pyramid form with the most important information coming first, followed by other highlights.
- ✧ In the bottom globe, tell your story in narrative form, from beginning to middle to end.
- ✧ This is a good form for any news story that can get readers to ask those great narrative questions: How did that happen? What happened next?
- ✧ Lots of crime stories look good in hourglass form, but any story with a cause and effect, or a complication and resolution, works: rescue stories, accident stories, journeys, quests and many others.

The Hourglass: Advantages

- 1) Readers get the news high in the story
- 2) The hourglass is a form that satisfies editors who prefer a traditional approach to news writing as well as impatient readers who tire easily of leisurely approaches to stories that take forever to get to the point.
- 3) Readers who want a more complete story, who like to see a story unfold as they read it, are happy as well.
- 4) The hourglass serves readers' need for news and their natural desire for story.
 - 1) The writer gets to use storytelling techniques,
 - 1) It encourages a real ending.

Story Structuring

- ✓ Learning how to properly structure a news story is one first steps to landing and maintaining a job. Every story should have a clear structure that provides convenience for the reader.
- ✓ The very first sentence or paragraph of your story is called the lead, and should contain the single most important piece of information.
- ✓ Leads can often make or break a story, so must be done right. Think of the lead as being the one sentence you would write if you could only write one sentence for the entire story.
- ✓ Within the next few paragraphs should come the details. This is where most of the sources, quotes and statistics should go. This is the part of the story where the reader learns about the entire situation surrounding your story, not just the basics of what happened.
- ✓ Once all of the necessary details are included, stop writing. News stories typically do not have endings like feature articles or novels do. Keep it as short as possible unless absolutely necessary

Scripting for TV News