

## Building THE DARK KNIGHT Screenplay by Dan Calvisi

*The Dark Knight* is an expert example of building an active story around **Theme**, one of the main dramatic elements in the “Basic Story Map.”

In a movie, especially a superhero action thriller, there must be HIGH STAKES with SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES. Life or death. Loyalty or betrayal. Love or Duty.

In *The Dark Knight*, the screenwriters wisely push the story to **the extremes of the conflict**. To find those extremes, they began with Bruce Wayne/Batman’s character and mythology and used those elements to push him into an impossible situation.

Here are three “essential truths” of Bruce Wayne/Batman:

- Bruce Wayne has sworn to protect the people of Gotham City.
- Bruce’s alter-ego Batman is the only thing that can protect them.
- Bruce’s one rule is not to kill.

The screenwriters will push Bruce into a position where he has only two options:

1. Give up his identity as Batman and turn himself in to the authorities, or
2. Kill The Joker.

In other words: **an impossible choice**.

This is what great drama is built upon.

The glue that holds it together is Theme.



**The Theme of The Dark Knight is....  
“Desperation pushes men to act in  
self-destructive and chaotic ways.”**

The writers use theme to create Bruce's actions and the trials that he will face in his fight to achieve his goal. This is why I call it the "controlling" theme, because it can be used to essentially control a character's actions and dialogue and guide the plot of your story. It maintains your crucial "story focus" that holds a Reader's attention.

**When in doubt about where to take the plot and what to make your character do...look for the answer in your theme.**

The writers began by making a list of extreme actions (things that Bruce Wayne would normally never do) that would express this theme:

- Bruce puts faith in a politician: District Attorney Harvey Dent.
- Bruce ignores the advice of Jim Gordon, Alfred, Harvey Dent, Lucius Fox and Rachel and decides to give up his identity.
- Bruce tortures a suspect in an interrogation.
- Bruce steals Lucius' technology and uses it to infringe on the privacy of all of Gotham's citizens, whom he has sworn to protect with honor.
- Bruce lets Batman take the fall for murder.

It then becomes the screenwriters' job to push Bruce into a position where he would logically (within the heightened "world" of a Batman movie) perform these actions. Since a great script focuses on a Protagonist that drives the story with their active decisions, it's not hard to think that the above list of actions formed the basic spine of the plot, the signpost story beats that make up the "Full Story Map."

This theme also forces other characters to take irrational action, for example:

- Harvey Dent tortures a paranoid schizophrenic for information.
- Jim Gordon fakes his own death, keeping the truth from his family.

And it "controls" the goal of the Antagonist, The Joker:

- The Joker hatches an intricate terrorist plot based on fear that forces the mob, Batman and the civilians of Gotham City to the point of desperation.

Ultimately, the screenwriters used their unique theme to construct an active story with multiple lines of action and a large ensemble of characters that fills 2 hours and 24 minutes of screen time.

It also seems likely that it was a theme relevant to the times; the post-9/11 "War on Terror" era in America and abroad. The theme had *urgency*. And it took a well-known character that we've seen portrayed in several films into new dramatic territory.

In short, if you know what your story is *about* – the idea you want to *explore* or *what you want to say* – then the blank page will not seem so daunting.



## Story Maps: Writing the GREAT Screenplay

A Story Map is my own method for structuring a screenplay by creating a simple yet powerful outline that contains the building blocks of your concept, characters and plot; the main dramatic elements and dramatic beats of the narrative and the order and crucial page range of those beats, no matter the genre.

- **95% of great movies follow the Story Map.**

I define it down to [the page](#). Because that's how the pros do it and that's exactly what I was looking for as a Senior Story Analyst working for major studios and production companies in the movie industry, evaluating incoming submissions of written material hoping to get the greenlight to be made into a movie.

It is a tremendous help to study how professional screenwriters take their characters along their journey from point A to Z. I encourage you to write Story Maps of all your favorite movies.

If you work with me, I will provide you with a primer on my Story Map method and several sample Story Maps from successful Hollywood movies, like my Full Story Map for *The Dark Knight*, below. These materials will give you a clear, powerful road to success on both a craft and commercial level with your writing.

Remember, the Story Map is a form, *not* a formula. It is a story structure that is followed by almost every popular Hollywood film and instantly recognized by every Agent, Manager and Producer in the business.

If you follow the Story Map and execute an active story in the proper page ranges, your script will FEEL like a modern hit movie.

I hope we can work together so I can introduce you to this powerful writing method.

Good luck and happy writing!

-Dan Calvisi

Act Four Screenplays – *Professional Story Consultation*

# THE DARK KNIGHT (2008) Story Map

Screenplay by Jonathan Nolan and Christopher Nolan

Story by Christopher Nolan & David S. Goyer

Directed by Christopher Nolan

Running Time: 144 minutes

## BASIC STORY MAP

**PROTAGONIST:** BRUCE WAYNE/ BATMAN

**Skill:** Physical strength/agility and incredible technology

**Misbehavior:** Stubbornness; pure loner, will not accept help or advice

**EXTERNAL GOAL:** To save Gotham City from destruction

**INTERNAL GOAL:** To be with Rachel / To preserve the hope of Gotham's people

**MAIN DRAMATIC CONFLICT:** The Joker

**THEME:** Desperation and fear lead to destructive actions.

**CENTRAL DRAMATIC QUESTION:** Can Bruce Wayne retire Batman and let Harvey Dent clean up Gotham?

**ENDING:** Bruce Wayne decides to let Batman take the fall for Harvey Dent's murders to maintain Dent as a hero to save the spirit of Gotham's people.

**ARC:** Bruce Wayne goes from believing he can end all crime in Gotham City as its hero to sacrificing Batman's good name to save Gotham City from destruction.

## STORY ENGINES

### ACT 1:

Bruce fights organized crime in Gotham City with the aid of District Attorney Harvey Dent.

### ACT 2A:

Bruce puts away the mob, but must fight the new, more deadly threat: The Joker. Bruce decides to turn himself in to protect innocent lives.

### ACT 2B:

Bruce's use of force cannot stop the Joker, leading to Rachel's death and Harvey Dent becoming Two-Face.

### ACT 3:

Bruce must stop The Joker and Two-Face and make a final sacrifice to preserve hope in the people of Gotham.

## FULL STORY MAP

Detailed Scene list with Story Map Story Beats:

### **ACT ONE:**



**Opening Image:** a silhouetted bat moves toward us, silently out of fire and shadow (Batman as an outlaw, a mysterious vigilante, but moving out from shadow into the light)

Opening sequence: bank robbery

2 – First mention of The Joker; they think he stayed home for the robbery. One Robber is silent.

5 – They are robbing from a mob-owned bank. A suicidal move. The “silent Robber” kills off last member of the bank heist crew.

6 – The silent Robber removes his mask: he is THE JOKER. He brilliantly escapes in broad daylight with all of the money.

**Key Dialogue:** Joker: “I believe whatever doesn’t kill you, simply makes you...stranger.” (theme stated: terrorize people with the threat of death and they will act in chaotic, self-destructive ways.)

9 – First appearance of Batman – he busts a deal between JONATHAN CRANE (a.k.a. The Scarecrow) and Moroni’s mobsters, taking out the criminals and some Batman COPYCATS.

**10 – INCITING INCIDENT, EXTERNAL “A” story (Batman saving Gotham City):** Batman catches The Scarecrow and key members of Moroni’s mob.

**11 – INCITING INCIDENT, EXTERNAL “B” story (Batman vs. Joker):** Batman pledges to Police Captain JIM GORDON that he will stop The Joker.

**13 – INCITING INCIDENT, INTERNAL (Rachel, love story):** RACHEL is dating HARVEY DENT, the new District Attorney. Bruce is jealous.

13 – Bruce sews up his own nasty wound. His body is covered in scars and bruises. Alfred tries to get Bruce to accept his limits. Bruce replies, "Batman has no limits." (sub-theme stated: True Identity. Are Bruce Wayne and Batman the same person?)

14 – Harvey Dent flips his lucky coin for the first time.

15 – Dent loses the Moroni case but knocks out the witness when the witness pulls a gun (thus displaying fighting skills that will later make it believable that he could be Batman).

16 – Dent approaches Gordon about working together. Gordon is cautious, won't give up Batman.

18 – LUCIUS FOX, CEO of Wayne Enterprises (and Batman's tech genius) considers a business deal with MR. LAO, a possibly corrupt Chinese businessman.

**20 – STRONG MOVEMENT FORWARD, "A" story:** Bruce crashes Rachel and Harvey's date. Bruce is convinced Harvey is legit, offers to throw him a fundraiser.

**Key Dialogue:** Harvey: "You either die a hero, or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain."

22 – Lao is working with Moroni's mob crew; he has moved all their money to Hong Kong, where he currently sits, protected from extradition.

23 - 25 – The Joker crashes the mob meeting, tells them he's their only chance at killing Batman. In exchange for him killing Batman, he wants half of all their money. GAMBOL, crime boss, puts a bounty on Joker's head.

**27 – END OF ACT ONE TURN :** Batman meets with Dent and Gordon. Their only hope to get Moroni's crew is to get Lao out of Hong Kong. Batman offers to bring Lao back from Hong Kong so Dent can prosecute him.

**28 – DECISION:** Bruce comes to Lucius for help with his plan to extricate Lao. Lucius shows Bruce the new Batman suit.

### **ACT TWO-A:**

29 – Bruce begins his plot to get Lao.

30 – Joker kills Gambol and starts to take over the mob.

**38 – FIRST TRIAL:** Bruce extricates Lao and drops him off at the Gotham police station. Rachel interrogates him; she and Dent come up with a plan to prosecute the entire mob.

39 – Gordon warns Dent not to keep Lao at county jail or he'll be assassinated.



40 – Gordon arrests Moroni's entire crew. They are all prosecuted by Dent.

**42 – FIRST CASUALTY:** The Joker’s first public murder: he has killed the copycat Batman vigilante (seen earlier); The Joker releases a chilling video clip to the media.

43 – Joker’s threat: Batman must reveal his identity or Joker will kill more people. Bruce dismisses the notion.

45 – Bruce’s penthouse fundraiser for Dent: “I believe in Harvey Dent.”

46 – Bruce tells Rachel that he can retire as Batman since Harvey Dent is Gotham’s true hero.

47 –Gordon and his cops figure out that The Joker is targeting three victims: the Mayor, the Judge and Harvey Dent.

48 – Harvey asks Rachel to marry him. She doesn’t have an answer yet.

48 – Bruce goes into action, takes Harvey to safety. Judge and Mayor assassinated by Joker.

49 – Joker shows up at fundraiser.



**52 – COMBAT:** Joker threatens Rachel. Batman fights Joker and his henchman.

53 – Joker throws Rachel out window. Batman saves her.

54 – Bruce is considering giving up his identity. Alfred to Bruce: “You’ve hammered them to the point of desperation.” Alfred tells Bruce the story of a bandit in Burma who stole rare jewels only to give them away.

**Key Dialogue:** Alfred: “...in their desperation, they turned to a man they didn’t fully understand. Some men can’t be reasoned or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn.” Batman’s methods and rules are not working against a man with neither.

56 – Joker’s next target: the new Mayor Garcia.

57 – REESE, Wayne accountant, has deduced that Bruce Wayne is Batman, tries to blackmail Lucius but Lucius intimidates him into quitting his plot.

59 – Bruce’s technology finds a clue: finger print on a bullet to lead him to Joker before he attempts to kill the new Mayor at the funeral parade. Bruce speeds to the site on his motorcycle.

62 – Joker attempts to shoot Mayor, hits Gordon, KILLING HIM.

63 – Dent takes henchman away to interrogate him.

66 – Moroni tells Batman that the Joker is untouchable; the only way to get the Joker is for Batman to take off his mask.



67 – Dent goes over the line and tortures the henchman. Batman stops him, warns him not to break any laws as he’s the only hope for Gotham. Bruce decides to give up his identity, tells Harvey to hold a press conference. Harvey objects, tells Bruce not to give in.

**Key Dialogue:** Bruce: “I’ve seen now what I have to become to stop men like him.”

69 – Rachel also tells Bruce not to give in, but she will be with him if he goes legit; they kiss.

70 – Bruce has Alfred burn all of Batman’s records. Alfred tells him not to give up his identity, but he respects Bruce’s decision.

**72 – MIDPOINT:** Bruce is about to give himself in when Harvey steps in, says he’s Batman. Dent is arrested. (This Midpoint is dead center in the story and directly pushes to Bruce’s climactic action: Bruce is forced to kill Harvey, but decides to let Harvey’s legacy be as the hero of Gotham.)

### **ACT TWO-B:**

73 – Rachel gives Alfred a letter for Bruce for “when the time is right.”

74 – Harvey risks his life in a convoy to set a trap for The Joker. Rachel sees that Harvey’s coin is two-sided: heads on both sides.

76 – Joker attacks convoy with Harvey Dent inside.

78 – Batman saves Harvey by blocking the Joker’s RPG blast with the Tumbler, crashes.

79 – Batman unleashes the BATPOD, new motorcycle, gives chase.

83 – Batman refuses to kill Joker, skids out. Gordon, ALIVE, catches The Joker.

87 – Gordon lets Batman interrogate The Joker.

**88 – DECLARATION OF WAR/ASSUMPTION OF POWER:** Batman loses control and begins to torture Joker by beating him. It doesn’t work. Joker tells him that the people of Gotham will turn on themselves.

89 [Standard length Turn\*] – The Joker has Dent and Rachel and he tells Batman he must break his one rule to save them.

90 [Standard length Decision\*] – Batman chooses to save Rachel; Gordon rushes to save Dent.

*\*Note: although this Act Two is longer than a “standard-length” feature film and will not end until minute/page 106, it’s interesting to note that there is still a Turn and Decision in the exact same range as in a standard-length feature film, which is done to adhere to the audience’s expectations of traditional pacing/structure.*



96 – Rachel killed. Dent’s face is burned. The Joker escapes from jail with Lau.

97 – Batman at the ashes. Alfred reads Rachel’s letter: she said she was marrying Harvey Dent.

**Key Dialogue:** Rachel: “I believe the day will come when Gotham no longer needs Batman, but I don’t think the day will come when Bruce Wayne doesn’t need Batman.”

98 – Bruce believes that Rachel was going to wait for him. Alfred refrains from giving him the letter.

100 – Dent wakes up in hospital, goes mad. His coin has become scuffed on one side.

102 – Moroni tells Gordon The Joker’s location.

103 – The Joker burns his money, completes his take-over of the mob and readies his final assault on Gotham.

104 – **END OF ACT TWO TURN:** Joker calls in to the tv show with an ultimatum: kill Reese (guy blackmailing Bruce Wayne) in 60 minutes or Joker will blow up a hospital (the threat is escalated; Joker is now asking civilians to kill).

105 – **DECISION:** Bruce goes into action to protect Reese (as Bruce, not Batman, thus integrating the two sides of his character and setting up his final decision about his identity in the Climax).

### **ACT THREE:**

106 – Civilian takes a shot at Reese; the Joker’s threat is causing chaos. Hospitals being evacuated.



107 – Joker has infiltrated the hospital in disguise, visits Harvey and begins to recruit him.

110 – Joker convinces Harvey, who becomes TWO-FACE. Harvey flips his coin, you live, you die. First time the coin toss could actually go one of two ways.

**Key Dialogue:** Joker: “I’m an agent of chaos. Oh, you know the thing about chaos. It’s fear.”

111 – Bruce crashes his Lamborghini sports car, saves Reese, but feigns ignorance to Gordon.

112 – Joker blows up Gotham General hospital, escapes once again.

113 – Joker’s threat: get out by nightfall or the city will burn.

114 – Lucius discovers Bruce using the sonar technology to spy on all of Gotham’s civilians to find The Joker’s position.

115 – Two-Face kills cop; begins killing spree to kill all people connected to Rachel’s death.

**117 – TRUE POINT OF NO RETURN** – Lucius tells Batman the sonar is wrong; “This is too much power for one man. Spying on 30 million people is not part of my job description.” Lucius will help him this one time, then resign. Bruce accepts his resignation.

119 – Two-Face spares Moroni’s life but kills his driver; car crashes.

119 – Prisoners and civilians are being evacuated on separate ferries.

120 – Ferries taken over by Joker’s plan; rigged to explode. Joker has given each boat the detonator for the other boat.

122 – The two boats start to fight over detonating the bombs.

123 – Two-Face forces Ramirez to trick Gordon’s family; his coin spares her life.

124 – Batman ignores Gordon’s orders and charges into Joker’s location to take out his men and save the civilian hostages they are holding.

125 – Two-Face takes Gordon’s family hostage.

126 – Batman struggles to save hostages and neutralize SWAT team

129 – Batman finds Joker – dogs attack Batman, his only weakness. Joker gets upper hand, beating him with a lead pipe.

130 – On both boats, a man volunteers to detonate the other boat.

132 – Joker holds Batman at bay, promises him the boats will explode when one person pushes the button. They don’t; Joker’s test of human nature in the face of fear has failed.

133 – Batman apprehends The Joker. The Joker monologues, comparing himself to Bruce, how they are both freaks, misunderstood by normal society.

134 – The Joker has a back-up plan: Harvey Dent/Two-Face. Harvey’s corruption will break the soul of Gotham’s citizens.

**Key Dialogue:** Joker: “Madness is like gravity. All it takes is a little push.”

135 – Gordon finds Two-Face holding his family at gunpoint.

137 – Batman arrives, tries to talk him down.

139 – Two-Face shoots Batman. Flips coin for himself; saved. Flips coin to decide fate of Gordon’s son; Batman tackles him over side of building – boy saved, Two-Face killed.

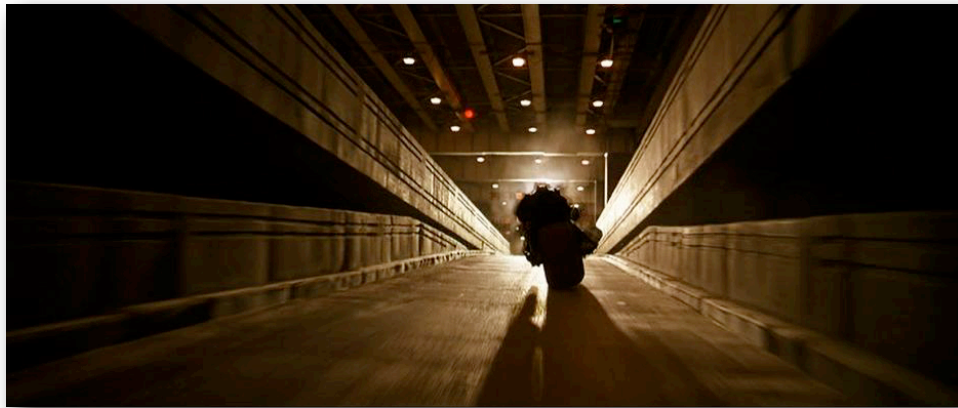
141 – Gordon’s spirit is crushed; Dent killed five people, so the city will give up hope and the Joker’s evil plan will have come to fruition.

**142 – CLIMAX, EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL:** Bruce decides to take the fall for Harvey’s killing spree. Dent will remain Gotham’s hero and Batman its outlaw. Batman will let himself be hunted, once again a criminal, SAVING GOTHAM CITY FROM DESTRUCTION.

**143 - 144 – EPILOGUE:** Gordon tells media about Harvey Dent being Gotham’s knight, but we know he’s really talking about Batman. Alfred burns the letter from Rachel. Lucius Fox resigns, destroys the sonar spy system. Batman runs from police.

**Key Dialogue:** Gordon: “Because he’s the hero Gotham deserves, but not the one it needs right now. So we’ll hunt him. Because he can take it. Because he’s not our hero. He’s a silent guardian. A watchful protector. A dark knight.”

**Final Image:** Batman riding away from us on the Batpod, back into the shadows of Gotham City (bookends with Opening Image)



## Where are you at in the screenwriting process?

- [I would like to develop an all-new concept into a screenplay with the guidance of a professional major movie studio Script Doctor.](#)
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- [I would like to hire an industry pro to write or rewrite my script for me.](#)
- [Read more about Dan.](#)

No matter if you’re just starting out or have written several scripts, I can help you to achieve your goals.

Good luck and happy writing!

-Dan Calvisi

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