



Screenwriting 101: For Script Stakes (/feature/category/screenwriting-101/3608-screenwriting-101-for-script-stakes)

by JONATHAN WILLIAMS on 24 APRIL 2017



0 Comments

Do not fret Chicken Little, the sky is not falling, or at least it doesn't have to. Stakes, they can always be higher, right? But let's be honest, nothing is more boring or lackluster these days than raising the stakes to your film by ending the world with a swirling vortex of doom while our heroes work quickly to stop it.

Like many of you I've been told that the stakes in my script could be higher, but forcing the end of the world into your script is about just as lazy as using Nazis for villains. There's no work involved, or more importantly, no character involved.

Swirling vortexes of doom are all too common in this day and age. So to show a comparison let's take an incredibly successful blockbuster to show how we can raise the stakes without having the sky fall.



Another day, another ominous doomsday device lingering above a major population center.

Jurassic Park, a timeless blockbuster that still holds up today and guess what? No vortex. Not even so much of a mention that if the dinosaurs get off the island it will bring about some sort of cataclysmic event, endangering mankind and the world as we know it. So how does it raise the stakes? The film establishes characters we care about and shows us the ruthless and carnivorous nature of these creatures. More so it spends a great deal building the suspense of the Velociraptors. Think about it, sure that whole T-Rex scene is iconic, but it was always the raptors that gave me nightmares as a kid. These stakes work because the groundwork is laid early on when both Dr. Grant and Monroe, the Great White Hunter, describe the creature's intelligent hunting patterns. Throughout the movie the characters come face to face with these ruthless hunters, escaping each time. So how do you up the stakes, simple trap all our beloved characters in one place with the raptors with no weapons or means of escape? In the end, it creates an exciting sequence, and look ma, no vortex.

Because there's no better way to learn from example let's take another one, this time let's take out the life or death situation.

Toy Story is a great example of this. There are moments of life or death, specifically when they are brought to Sid's house and Buzz is strapped to a firework, but the main climax of this film is Woody and Buzz's race to catch Andy's moving truck and van before they are left behind here. The stakes here are built into the fabric of the film. We know and understand Woody's love and connection with Andy from the very beginning, a connection which Buzz has not yet developed, or in Woody's eyes, earned up to this point. But it is when Buzz realizes that his worth is not in being a space ranger but in being Andy's toy that we understand what's at stake – love.

Once again the key is character. Instead of just tacking on a swirling vortex of doom to your story look at what is already in place. If the audience is connecting emotionally with your characters you simply need to raise the stakes to a higher emotional level. Sure, at the end of *Toy Story* Buzz and Woody would have escaped Sid's, but if they failed to catch Andy's van they will have essentially lost their identity and the love of their owner.



Stakes 101: A forgotten toy watches in anguish as his entire existence disappears along a quiet suburban street.

In *Jurassic Park*, Dr. Grant despises kids and uses the tale of the Velociraptor to scare an unsuspecting smart-ass kid, but in the end, it is he who is protecting the kids from the raptors.

If you are struggling to raise the stakes just examine your characters and the story you're trying to tell. How do your characters relate to these moments? And if all else fails, discover your character's worst fear and exploit it, gradually until, in the end, you've turned the volume up to 10.

Another important element of raising the stakes is to create an effective build. Like the Velociraptors in *Jurassic Park*, you want to slowly increase each conflict. Each raptor encounter builds and builds, it creates fear, not only within your characters but the audience as well. Then, in the end, our characters and the audience are face-to-face with these creatures and no place to go.

Horror films are ripe for raising the stakes as high as they can go but on a small scale. Take *The Conjuring*. Obviously, if the entire family dies it won't mean anything to the outside world. Hell, people would probably try to find a rational explanation outside of possession to explain the horrific events that happened. Once again the stakes lie in our characters, each scare brings us closer to the family's plight as if they were our own. Yet we fear greatly for them. Why? Because the writer has done his work and made us care about the characters. Once you've established an emotional connection between your characters and the audience and properly build the conflict...well, the stakes are the limit.