

SAVE THE CAT![®] GOES TO THE INDIES

The Screenwriters Guide to 50 Films from the Masters



SAMPLE BEAT SHEET
THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE

THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE (1974)

Five teenage friends on a weekend trip end up being chased by a serial killer who disposes of them one by one, until just a “Final Girl” remains alive... sounds familiar, yes? But there was a pre-*Halloween* time in which the “slasher film” trope was not that well-known, and this low-budget movie not only helped set some of its “rules,” but is also considered a masterpiece.

Widely studied by scholars, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* holds rich cultural themes about late-Vietnam America, like the end of the hippie dream and the counter-culture, and the clash between modern values and rural family lifestyle. Even today, the scandal its supposed grisliness caused still resonates, though little actual violence or gore is shown onscreen.

Story-wise, it is an interesting film to analyze because it has little characterization and a meager plot. Still, there abounds a basic trait, one that Blake mentioned as a special characteristic of MITH movies: its *primal-ness*, as only survival counts in a film in which death is present everywhere.

In the end, it doesn't matter that we know little about the characters and how barebones (literally, we could say) its structure reads — it leaves us with only our most basic narrative tools to use, namely the BS Beat Sheet. So prepare yourself for a horror feast... although this particular film may not leave you exactly hungry for more.

MITH Type: Serial Monster

MITH Cousins: *Halloween*, *Cold Prey*, *Friday the 13th*, *Hostel*, *Prom Night*

THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE

Story by Kim Henkel and Tobe Hooper

Directed by Tobe Hooper

Opening Image: After a “based on a real story” roll, gruesome flashes of decaying body parts are shown in darkness, while an eerie newscaster talks about grave robbing, sick crimes and morbid

occurrences. The scene finishes with a “grisly work of art,” a statue made of body parts erected under the scorching Texas sun — death is even present in broad daylight.

Set-Up: A classic Set-Up for a “Serial Monster” story, five hippie teenagers drive out of their usual environment for a weekend trip, although the reason is not a happy one: they must check to see if the grave of Sally and Franklin’s grandfather has been desecrated. Although not much is said about the characters, we know that wheelchair-bound Franklin is quite a whiner, Jerry is the sarcastic one, Sally is quite naive, Kirk is the tough one and Pam is addicted to horoscopes — and we might note that all signs around them are ominous and evil, so their “sin” is ignoring them.

B Story: Our “relationship” story here is among family, as there is great tension between Franklin and Sally. They are fighting; things are sour between them. He does not seem all that welcome on the trip and behaves like a peevish brat, which makes all of them uncomfortable, and tries Sally’s patience. Later, we will meet a different set of siblings that seem to get along way better, because a family that *slays* together... *stays* together! (There goes my \$1 dollar joke.)

Theme Stated: When the group reaches the cemetery, they meet several locals, mostly drunk rednecks who can’t take their eyes off Sally, and one of them utters a foreboding rant: “Things happen hereabout they don’t tell about. I see things...” What are those things and why don’t they talk about them?

Catalyst: On their way from the graveyard they find Hitchhiker, a weird young man who freaks them out by telling how his brother and grandfather used to work at the local slaughterhouse, and that his family has “always been in meat.” Afterwards, he takes a knife from Franklin and slices him in the arm, also cutting his own hand! They kick him out of the vehicle, but he smears a strange symbol with his own blood on it, a new dark sign.

Debate: “There are moments when we cannot believe what is happening is true,” says the newspaper horoscope in pure Debate fashion, and that seems to happen to the group. What must they do now? Before answering the question, they need to refuel, so they stop at a gas station, where they also inquire about Franklin’s old house. The strange Old Man (Jim Siedow) warns them not to go around it, as “those things is dangerous.... You are liable to get hurt.”

Break into Two: Still ignoring every warning, the teens go back to the road to visit the old house, with Franklin thinking about the strange hitchhiker and eating some weird-shaped barbecue.

Fun and Games: At last, Sally and the others can relax when they arrive at the old family house. Even though it is ramshackle and dirty, it holds great memories for Sally, and everybody’s laughter fills the place, except for Franklin, who is unable to freely move around and share the good times. Even as they laugh, there are more ominous signs found in the house, but Kirk and Pam pay no attention to them as they decide to go for a bath at the creek. It’s dry, and they hear a motor humming in the distance, so maybe they can get some gasoline. Unluckily, after not noticing another sign (a human tooth), Kirk gets killed by a huge strange man in a dead skin mask. Meet Leatherface (Gunnar Hansen), model for many serial killers to come, as Pam can attest after being killed in one of the most cruel and iconic deaths in cinema history.

Midpoint: As night begins to fall (a sign of the *ticking clock*), *stakes have been raised*. Now getting the gasoline is a matter of life and death, although the remaining friends still don’t know it. While Sally utters her “public display” as a hero — “We’ll protect you” — is she really capable of protecting anyone? Can she even save herself? In any case, *A and B Stories cross* as Franklin keeps whining about his lost knife, driving Sally mad, still hiding the fact that she did not want him there. Franklin wonders about the signs they have seen and Sally can only answer: “Everything means something, I guess.”

Bad Guys Close In: A characteristic of this beat is that “the group disintegrates” even more, with Jerry leaving them to search for his friends and entering Leatherface’s home. After finding Pam in a refrigerator, he is killed too. Back at the van, Franklin wants to go with Sally even if he is a physical and emotional burden for her, as they inadvertently attract the attention of Leatherface, who appears out of the dark and dispatches of Franklin with his trademark chainsaw. With the enemy as close as he can be, Sally tries to get away in the dark countryside, running among dead trees and branches, at the same time becoming one of the screen’s greatest “scream queens”!

All Is Lost: Sally finds salvation in the gas station, where the Old Man they met at the beginning protects and comforts her. As there is not a phone, the man decides to get his truck. This might seem like like an All Is Won moment, but Sally’s mistake has cost her a final chance of survival.

Dark Night of the Soul: In this beat, major characters “contemplate death,” and that is exactly what Sally does when she is left alone in the room, watching the barbecue meat and listening to more horrible news on the radio, reminding her — and us — that the real world hides danger too.

Break into Three: That danger is confirmed when the Old Man returns to the room with a sack and a strange smile, revealing that his intentions are not good. After disarming and tying up Sally (temporarily depriving her of her proactivity), he puts her in the car and drives her to a home we know all too well. They find Hitchhiker on the way, revealing that he is family (some say brothers) with him and Leatherface, a dark *Moment of Clarity* for Sally.

Finale:

1. **Gathering the Team:** The Sawyers are reunited (read: gathered) for the first time in the film, including Grandpa, “the best killer in the family,” who can barely move, but can definitely enjoy the blood that Hitchhiker gets from Sally’s finger before she passes out.
2. **Executing the Plan:** Literally “executing,” as when Sally wakes up, the family decides to carry out their plan to terminate her suffering by killing her, the slaughterhouse-old-school way, and let’s just say it (gasp!) involves a hammer.
3. **High Tower Surprise:** When Hitchhiker is about to finish off Sally, he gets overconfident and she manages to free herself, jumping out of a window and finding herself on the loose at dawn.
4. **Dig, Deep Down:** But Sally is still not yet safe. She must “dig, deep down” and run for her life while Hitchhiker chases her, slicing her with his straight razor, while Leatherface and his chainsaw are not far behind.
5. **The Execution of the New Plan:** At this point, Sally’s new plan is to stop a vehicle to get away, something she almost accomplishes when a cattle truck runs over Hitchhiker. Still chased by Leatherface, she jumps in the back of a pickup and barely escapes alive.

Final Image: A blood-soaked Sally laughs hysterically in the car, and we know for sure that after losing all her friends and experiencing so many horrors, she is not and will never be the innocent girl she was at the beginning. As for Leatherface, he is left angry and frustrated, swinging around his chainsaw in the middle of the road, showing again that some horrors still await us in broad daylight.