Screenplay Guidelines and Tips

prepared by Janaki Cedanna

What is a story?

Too often short films writers resort to creating a situation, instead of a story. In a situation, a stock character tackles with a problem for several minutes without success. A final twist provides the resolution of his troubles –often through no action of his own. The character is often unchanged by his experiences. In a story, a character must want something more than anything in the world. The hero must overcome obstacles that create some kind of conflict for him. He must find ways to resolve his predicament. The hero either succeeds or doesn't. In the process, the hero of the story learns something, and is forever changed by his experiences. Those dramatic elements make a story compelling to watch.

Is a short film easier to write than a long one?

Yes and no. On the one hand, a short script is more manageable to write than a typical feature length screenplay, which is between 110-120 pages long. A short script is about one-twelfth of that. The cast of the short film is often limited to two or three main characters, often less fleshed out than in a feature film. The plot of a short screenplay is linear and uncomplicated by the subplots of the longer form. So in this sense, yes, the short script is easier to write. On the other hand, you still have to tell a story and you have only 5 minutes to do the following:

-Grab your audience's attention.

-Set up the location, style and mood of your film.

-Create believable characters –a main one, and an antagonist. The main character must want something as if his life depended on it, and will have trouble achieving/getting it. This is called conflict.

-Deliver a satisfying ending.

And all this within five minutes! You can do it!

First, you need to have an idea.

Where do I find an idea to write?

Use as a starting point something that captures your imagination or unlocks a powerful emotional reaction. It could be, for instance:

-A person (friend, acquaintance, family member, celebrity) so intriguing you cannot get him out of your mind

-A snippet of dialogue exchanged between two strangers on a bus ride across the States

-A chapter of family lore passed down over generations –like what happened to your great-uncle the first time he got his hair cut

-An outlandish article in the Enquirer

-The color of the ocean on a stormy day

-The mournful sound of a train whistle at night

-A troubling image in a dream you had a long time ago, but has stayed with you

-A situation that made you laugh

-An abstract concept (intolerance, loneliness, poverty)

What you are looking for is a powerful creative trigger, an event that struck you in one way or another, and you want to write about it. When you explore your options for a story idea, always focus on how you feel about it. It's that FEELING, that EMOTION that are important. Fear, anger, a desire for revenge, a sense of thrill or elation, all are powerful engines behind the desire to write. What you write about has to matter to YOU. If you are not passionate about what you want to tell, you will not be able to make other people care, either.

I have my idea. How do I turn it into a story?

Once you have found the creative trigger for your story, play a game of "What if?" with it. Playing "What if" allows you to explore all the possible dramatic situations that can develop from the original idea. It is what professional writers call "Brainstorming". The important rule is that you pay attention to the choice you make when you answer the "What if?" question. Each answer is a choice you make. That choice will determine the next question. Your narrative will start developing in a specific direction. Little by little, the image you started with will be transformed through the decisions you make. Your goal is to come up with the most interesting, dramatic situation possible.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming using "What if" allows you to commit to certain characters (to their appearance, values, behavior), to certain events that lead to other events (plot), and to a point-of-view. Your main characters. As you play "What if?" you make important discoveries about your hero (their physical appearance, attitude toward life, main goal), create other characters, and imagine their relationships with each other.

A plot and a dramatic moment

You have determined a logical series of events, or plot, for your story. The fulcrum of your story is the most dramatic moment. It is the point around which the rest of your story is constructed. It is the moment where the circumstances you imagined intersect with your character's urgent need.

A point of view

If a homeless man is your main character, and when you played "What If" you could have decided that the more interesting story was that of the homeless man. In this case,

the choices you would have made would have been different and the story told from his point of you. You would have told a different kind of story.

What makes a good story for a short film?

Compelling characters.

The temptation when you write a short film, and have less time to develop complex characters, is to write your characters in short-hand. If their behavior is simplistic and predictable, your story will be, too. Characters, particularly your hero's, is the force that drives your story. Do not shortchange your characters! Give them the full range of human characteristics:

• Physical: the character's height, weight, gender, age, clothes they wear can all influence how your story develops.
• Behavioral: there can be unexpected contrast between expected behavior and actual behavior (for instance, a psychiatrist who is obsessively re-arranging the pens on his desk). This disconnect between what is expected and the actual behavior of the character is immediately intriguing –and often humorous.
• A strong need: Character is ACTION. An action is what the character DOES in order to get what he WANTS. Energize your story by making the hero's need extreme. What the character wants, he wants passionately. He wants it more than anything in the world. The need of the character must be immediate and urgent, especially in a short film.

The element of conflict.
Conflict is the result of what a character "want" (his goal), and the obstacles he must face to get what he wants. Those obstacles can be another character, nature, society, community. Those are called external obstacles. Sometimes, the obstacles are purely internal –an addiction, psychological issues resulting from a trauma, for instance. Watching the hero struggle against those obstacles is what makes a story interesting. Your job is to make the life of you character difficult! The character says: "I want this!" Say "NO!" to your character! In the famous short film *The Lunch Date*, the worst possible obstacle for this wealthy, bigoted, hungry woman takes the shape of a homeless man eating her lunch. The more you intensify the pressure on your hero, the more fun it will be for the audience to watch your movie.

Can you tell your story "in pictures"?
Films are a visual medium. The best stories are the one that you can tell with images that have a strong dramatic impact. This is not always easy: to be understood by your audience, some stories require a lot of exposition. Exposition is the essential information that you need to reveal to your audience for them to be able to understand the plot. There are two types of information that are the most challenging to reveal. Both deal with the "hidden" aspects of your characters' lives.

The first type of exposition deals with the Backstory of your characters: events that took place before the movie begins, but have a direct impact on what is about to take place. How do you make Backstory information immediate? It can be done with simple visual details that tell us instantly all we need to know about the action of the character before the story opens. In *The Lunch Date*, a short film by Adam Davidson, the movie opens with a lady carrying shopping bags from expensive New York department stores through Grand Central Station. This is a visual shortcut, which rapidly conveys the fact that this is a wealthy woman who spent her day shopping in the city, without ever having to show this.

The second type of exposition that is often difficult to handle deals with the internal life of your characters - emotions, thoughts, feelings. In this case, the challenge is to make that information concrete and visible to the audience. Character behavior, or a potent visual can economically externalize all the audience needs to know to participate in the story. You can make dramatic situations so well set-up that dialogue is unnecessary. **Show, don't tell!**

Structuring your story

A story, any story, has a beginning, a middle, and an end. In a feature film, each part has a specific function: you have about 30 minutes of Exposition (the beginning) to introduce the characters and their world. The middle, called Confrontation, is about 60 minutes long. The hero goes on his quest to get or achieve something, encounters a number of obstacles that become harder to surmount as the movie progresses. In the third act (also called Resolution) hero must come face-to-face with the antagonist for the final showdown (or Climax). Then the world returns to a new order, and we get a glimpse of the future for the hero in this new world (the resolution). This can take 10-30 minutes.

A short film follows the same basic structure in which to organize all the elements of your story, and each "act" must accomplish the same function as in a feature. Yet, you do not have as many minutes to do the same job.

Screenwriting: Constructing a Story

Every story starts with an idea. At the heart of every great film you will find that idea. Whether it be 'love conquers all' or 'evil never dies', the characters and events encapsulate that idea and express it in a unique way. This is no coincidence. Each action, character trait and line of dialogue has been carefully selected by the screenwriter and woven into the story.

While there is no definitive structure for a successful film, many mainstream films follow a three-act structure. The first act sets the scene, introduces the characters and relevant backstories, and provides the audience with the information required to not only understand the story, but also identify with the main character (protagonist). The first act culminates in an 'inciting incident' which Robert McKee describes as an event that

"radically upsets the balance of forces in the protagonist's life" (p.189). The inciting incident becomes the catalyst for the events of the film. The second act follows the protagonist's attempts to restore balance in their newly imbalanced world. In the second act the protagonist experiences ups and downs, overcoming obstacle after obstacle until the point of crisis – the ultimate obstacle and climax of the film. The final act resolves the story and restores balance to the protagonist's life.

Great films have interesting protagonists, usually with emotional depth. While actors contribute to the development of the characters they portray, each character usually has 3-5 basic traits incorporated into the script by the screenwriter. Each action and line of dialogue is then tailored to illustrate one or more of the character's traits. When a character is written well, each line of dialogue is revealing – not only by what the character says, but what they choose not to say.

How Can I Do All This in 5 Minutes?

Tips for Organizing Your Writing & Staying Sane

• The first and most important rule-of-thumb: KEEP IT SIMPLE!

• Start your story as late as possible: Start your story at the moment something is about to happen to the hero. In other words, choose the last possible moment to enter the story and still have it make sense.

• Create your hero and another main character. Everybody else is an extra.

• Use polarities to create your protagonist (hero) and your antagonist: think of personalities that are polar opposites in terms of values, age, tastes, social position, sexual inclinations, abilities, behavior, etc. This is a simple way to create conflict as you pit one character against his opposite, and let the situation play out between them.

• Use Characterization: This means that you externalize the temperament, profession, social status, attitudes, thoughts and feelings of your characters through character behavior. In other words, you make their Backstory and internal life visible –visual- on screen. In The Lunch Date, the lady wears a fur coat, brushes past begging homeless people, speaks imperiously to the short order cook, polishes her fork before using it. All these elements are telling clues to the lady's personality. Note that characterization is not caricature: although certain attributes allow the audience to identify the lady's "type" immediately, the details of her behavior reveal her unique personality.

• Give your hero one Goal: Keep the character's goal clear and simple. What the hero wants (or needs) to accomplish must be conveyed quickly.

• Throw one major obstacle in the hero's way: The hero faces one major external obstacle, and/or one internal one. In The Lunch Date, the lady must confront the homeless man (external obstacle), and conquer her own obsessive cleanliness (internal obstacle) to get what she wants (the salad). What makes the scene compelling and funny is the attention paid to the details of both characters' behavior and on the development of an improbable relationship.
• Surprise us: The resolution: there is often a twist at the end of a short film, something that adds interest, or humor to a conventional ending. Its purpose is to make the audience think, or to make them laugh (or both). In The Lunch Date, the woman realizes that her salad –the one she really bought- is left untouched in the next booth. This makes her –and us- think about prejudice: we never doubted that the homeless man had stolen the lady's salad when, in fact, he was generously sharing his meal with her. Beware the twist that solves the hero's problem! If the lady had noticed the other salad (her own) sooner, the conflict would have come to an end without her having any active role in it. The lady would not have struggled to overcome her social and personal aversions. The story would be flat and uninteresting. The Lunch Date could have turned into another boring morality tale instead of winning an Academy Award!
• Choose a few locations and choose them well, therefore, when you write your scenes, keep the following parameters in mind for your locations:

- o Think of access and control: remote locations requiring driving for miles, or busy locations with a lot of traffic and noise will create insurmountable challenges for the teams.
- o Choose locations that are interesting yet practical: Dorm rooms tend to all look the same, but sets requiring extensive design will use up a lot of precious time to dress. You know the campus and the immediate environs. Use your imagination!

The Screenwriter's Toolkit

Just like any good craftsman, a screenwriter has a set of tools at their disposal that they need to master if they are going to have any real chance of success in this highly competitive industry. As a writer you must become good at most of these, but few can master them all. So here is a checklist of the main tools you need to learn about and a brief description of how you can use them.

A Log Line – A log-line is the basic idea for your movie written in one or two sentences. It should show what the genre is, who the lead character is, what they want, what they are forced to do to try and get it, and what happens.

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Log-lines for some well known movies

You should be able to write down the basic idea for your movie in one or two sentences, showing who the lead character is, what they want, what they are forced to do, and what happens. These statements are called log-lines and are a bit like TV listings.

Some producers also refer to log-lines as premises, and screenwriters are expected to write these for use in documents that help raise finance for the shoot and later are used to sell the movie to the public. Here are some familiar examples. If you haven't seen these films before, try to rent them, because we will use these films as our main examples throughout this guide:

Braveheart (Written by Randal Wallace) – William Wallace wants a peaceful life as a farmer but after his wife is murdered he unites the divided Scottish people to overthrow English rule.

Cold Mountain (Screenplay by Anthony Minghella) – Two lovers are separated by the American Civil War. After Inman is wounded he tries to get back to Ada in Cold Mountain, where he must save her from Teague the murderous leader of the Home Guard.

Lord of The Rings (1-3) (Screenplays by Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens, Stephen Sinclair [only *The Two Towers*], Peter Jackson) – After Frodo Baggins inherits a Golden Ring, he is shocked to discover it is the most dangerous and evil weapon in Middle Earth and that he must go on an epic quest to Mordor to throw it into the Crack of Doom and save the world.

The Matrix (Written by Andy and Larry Wachowski) – A rebellious computer hacker Neo hunts down the mysterious Morpheus who reveals that Neo is a slave living inside a computer dream. Morpheus rescues Neo who joins forces with the rebels to defeat the machines that have enslaved humanity.

Notting Hill (Written by Richard Curtis) – William Thacker is a regular bookshop owner whose life changes forever when a famous film star walks into his shop. But love in the public eye is not easy, and William must prove his love is strong enough if he is to win Anna's heart.

Sixth Sense (Written by M. Night Shyamalan) – A depressed child psychologist tries to help a boy who is tormented by ghosts only to find out that he's a ghost himself.

There is of course no 'right way' to write a log-line but they usually include the following elements.
1. The name of the lead character
2. The setting of the movie

3. An idea of what they want
4. What or who tries to stop them
5. What challenge they will have to complete to try and get what they want, and
6. Whether they are changed by their experiences or not.

Log-lines sometimes mention the name of the second most important character, usually the opponent, unless it's a love story like *Cold Mountain* when you would typically mention both the lover and the external opponent.

A Premise – When producers ask for a premise they usually mean a Log-Line, because a premise is essentially a writer's tool that says who the lead character is, what their character weakness is, what they want, what unexpected action they are forced to take by the opponent to get what they want, and how they change as a result of their experience. This is essentially the lead character's story arc which provides the spine of your movie. As well as your lead character premise, it can also be useful to map out your other character premises to see where they are likely to come into conflict.

A Synopsis – essentially a premise expanded to three sentences for a short film or three paragraphs for a feature (beginning, middle and end). The synopsis expands on what will happen to the lead character at each stage of the story and how they come to change by the end. Synopses should show the main reversals and twists and how these impact on the lead characters (and sometimes the opponent's motivation).

A Treatment – producers, broadcasters and funding bodies frequently ask screenwriters to submit a 5-20 page (depending on the funder) treatment of their idea before reading or commissioning a screenplay. Treatments are incredibly tricky to write because some readers want the treatment to show primarily what the audience will see on screen and other readers want a novelistic impression of the story. If you write the former the reaction will often be "the story reads a little flat" (especially if it is a comedy), and if you write the second way the reaction will often be "the structure seems weak". This is why most screenwriters will tell you that they hate treatments more than anything else!

A Beat Outline (or Beat Sheet)– this is effectively your first attempt to map out the main scenes that you will need to tell your story. So that you can keep track of the overall structure of your screenplay, it is usually best to limit yourself to a one sentence description of each scene - though certain big scenes (e.g. a family party) might need to be broken down into sub-beats describing the mini scenes taking place throughout the house between different characters. Write your story out scene by scene; and see if you can group them into sequences. Like this:

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1. Galadriel narrates the story of Sauron and the One Ring
2. Frodo is relaxing in the idyllic surroundings of the Shire, when
Gandalf the Grey arrives for Bilbo's birthday party
3. Gandalf talks with Bilbo about the ring
4. The Birthday Party - Clips of guests enjoying the party
• Gandalf starts the firework display
• Merry and Pippin let off a big rocket
• Bilbo and Gandalf smoke their pipes and talk about old
times
• Bilbo gives his speech and uses the Ring to disappear
5. Gandalf finds Bilbo back at Bag End and forces him to leave the
Ring for Frodo on the mat
6. Frodo picks up the Ring and drops it in Gandalf's envelope.
Gandalf tells Frodo to keep the Ring in a safe place.

For a feature you are likely to need around 50-60 (main scenes) at this stage of the development process.

A Step Outline – this is effectively an expanded Beat Outline. But instead of writing scenes in a single sentence, you expand each beat to give some indication of how it might be shot. For instance in a beat outline, you might write, "James goes to the Church to see the priest and beg forgiveness for his sins." In a Step Outline this would become:

INT. HOLY CROSS CHURCH. DAY.

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James walks into the Church. He stops at the door. Crosses
himself. Then staggers on down the aisle. He reaches the altar

and collapses sobbing with shame. The young priest sees him and
hurries over. James looks up.
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INT. CONFESSIONAL BOX. DAY.

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James confesses to the murder. The priest lets out an
involuntary groan of sympathy. James bows his head and
continues.
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The Screenplay – this is effectively the Step Outline with the Action expanded in greater detail to give an impression of the succession of shots, and with the Dialogue

and Reaction Shots added. Since movies are told primarily with images, the Dialogue should only be added after all the other stages have been completed. This is because writing dialogue often makes the writer lazy about describing what is happening and the screenplay becomes overloaded with unnecessary conversation instead. The more of the story you can tell with images alone the better the audience will like the movie. If you are writing a comedy it is often worth writing sample scenes to explore the way characters interact on a comic level.

Screenplays are always written in the present tense – even when you are writing a FLASHBACK. You must always describe what the audience is seeing at that moment on the screen. If it's something the audience can't see, don't write it. It's a cheat that will be found out in the edit and cause the rest of your team no end of problems. So when you write a synopsis, treatment or outline make sure that you stick to the active present tense (e.g. He kisses her and smiles. She picks up the Wedding register. He stares at her confused. She whacks him on top of the head with the book.)

How Does this Apply to a Short Film?

All of these items are important for successful short film. Following these important tools used by writers to organize their story are essential. Here are two examples of the treatment and the step-outline. The treatment is a plotting tool. The step-outline will help you to define the content, function, and placement of each individual scene of your movie. The difference between a beat outline and a step outline is that a beat outline does not include scene headings, whereas a step outline does.

Write a one-page treatment (or Beat Outline):
A treatment is a narrative summation of your story. It is always written in the present tense, like the final screenplay, and usually does not include any dialogue (what people say), except perhaps for a few key words. It is, as Syd Field calls it in his seminal book "Screenplay", the roadmap of your movie that tells the writer and the reader the bare bones of what happens in every scene of the story. This should concentrate on the motivations, actions and reactions of the characters and a very brief synopsis of any critical dialogue. It allows you to get a sense of where your story is going by visualizing and dramatizing the scenes. It is simply a writing tool, which will make the story clearer for YOU. The main purpose of a treatment is to begin plotting your story. The plot is a series of actions, or events that cause something else to occur.

Tips on Treatment Writing
A treatment is not a psychological analysis. Write ONLY what is going to take place on the screen. You can write in the style of the film to give an idea of the tone of your movie.

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Emphasize the visual action of each scene; Strong descriptions or bits of dialogue can effectively give a sense of the specific world of your movie.

You want to grab the reader's attention: try to provoke an emotion; Highlight what makes your movie special.

ONE-PAGE OUTLINE OR BEAT OUTLINE:
Example

• Johnny's Birthday Party – Johnny's party starts well, but goes pear shaped when he catches his sister's junkie boyfriend, Dougie pocketing his mother's antique plate.
• Johnny throws him out, but his sister notices. She comes to Dougie's defence. A fight starts and Johnny accidentally breaks Margaret's nose.

or

The Mask of Zorro
3/11/94

The opening sequence is told through the eyes of two young brothers, ALEJANDRO and JOAQUIN MURIETTA. It takes place in Alta California, 1822. Mexico is about to win its independence. The Spanish Viceroy of California, MONTERO, realizes his time is up. He has ordered the execution of all political prisoners. The boys sneak into the town Square to watch the hangings.

But Montero is foiled again by ZORRO, who sails in and frees the prisoners. Completely heroic, a black apparition in the moonlight, Alejandro and Joaquin watch him in wonderment. But Montero was counting on Zorro's arrival; more soldiers wait in ambush. Zorro is unaware of the trap.

Alejandro and Joaquin give warning. Zorro defeats the soldiers. He thanks the brothers, and presents them with the medallion he wears around his neck, and then he is gone. Joaquin, the eldest, claims the medallion over his little brother's objections. Joaquin also finds an abandoned sword ...

Zorro rides back to his secret cave behind the waterfall. He emerges in his hacienda as Don DIEGO DE LA VEGA, a wealthy caballero with a wife, ESPERANZA, and two-year-old daughter, ELENA. He starts to tell Elena what he did that night, but Esperanza points out that she's not paying attention. Diego says that someday, she will listen to his stories. And so on….

If you are finding it difficult to put together a beat outline, first try laying out your story in the form described in the **Action** section of the guidelines, answering all of the following questions:

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1. **Introduce your lead character and setting**
    - Where is s/he?
    - What is s/he doing?
    - Does s/he have friends or family with him/her?
    - What is his/her character weakness?
2. **What does the lead character want?**
    - What does s/he need to learn?
    - Is there something s/he is overlooking
3. **How does s/he set about getting what s/he wants?**
4. **Set-backs** - Because s/he is not aware of what it is s/he *really* needs, s/he will usually go about getting what s/he wants the wrong way. This brings the lead character into conflict with other people who don't like what s/he is doing - or the way s/he is going about it.
    - Who tries to stop him/her?
    - And how do they try to stop them?
    - How does the lead character try to overcome them?
    - Does anyone help him/her?
5. **Conflict** - The arguments and fights become more and more heated until it looks like the lead character will be defeated.
    - How does the fight get worse?
    - Do the friends support or desert him/her?
6. **Final Struggle** - The lead character summons his/her strength for a final attempt to achieve his/her goal.
    - What happens? And where?
7. **Endings** - The lead character discovers that what they thought they wanted in the beginning was only part of the truth; that there is more to life than they originally thought.
    - What is the outcome of the conflict or adventure?
    - What has the lead character learned?

If you can answer all these questions, you will be well on your way to writing your outline. Just expand the sections 4) and 5) to show the different strategies your lead character employs to try and overcome their opponent and get what they want, and how this leads up to the final conflict.

Write a step-outline:
A Step-Outline is a scene-by-scene template of what happens in your screenplay. This includes the slug line (INT. CHURCH DAY or EXT. FIELDS NIGHT) and one or two line description of the scene and includes every scene in your movie. The step-outline of a short film should not be more than a page long –probably one or two major, dramatic scenes, at the most.

Example:

INT. JOHNNY'S HOUSE - KITCHEN. NIGHT

Johnny's precocious niece Agnes sings a cheesy pop-song song to the assembled family. Johnny smiles at his guest.

Smiles back from FAMILY and friends.

Johnny frowns; there's someone missing.

INT. JOHNNY'S HOUSE – DINING ROOM. NIGHT

Dougie is stuffing an antique plate into the inside pocket of his leather jacket.

Johnny is disgusted. He rushes over. Dougie is caught red handed. Johnny places the plate on the table, then frogmarches Dougie to the door.

EXT. JOHNNY'S HOUSE – BACK DOOR. NIGHT

Johnny throws Dougie out, cursing him as a "goucher". Dougie doesn't like the insult and starts cursing back.

Margaret hears this and wants to know what the hell's going on. Johnny tells her he caught Dougie stealing. Dougie denies it. A scuffle.

Margaret tries to pull them apart. Dougie drops another piece of china. Case proven. Johnny lamps him. Dougie's head snaps back and breaks Margaret's nose. Margaret screams hysterically.

The Short Screenplay

Layout & Formatting

EXAMPLE OF A SHORT SCREENPLAY

Go to http://www.dartmouth.edu/~shortflm/mama_script.htm to find the script for "Because of Mama"

Screenplay Layout

Layout is not something that should trouble you when you are writing your screenstory. However, when you do sit down to write your draft screenplay, it is very important that it is written in the correct format.

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The Mastershot format (as the feature film format is known) was developed in Hollywood during the days of the typewriter, so the font you use is always Courier 12 point or Courier New 12 pt, using standard margins for each different element of your screenplay.

SCENE HEADINGS (or 'Slug Lines'):	Left Margin: 1.50" Right Margin: 7.50"
ACTION (description of what happens):	Left Margin: 1.50" Right Margin: 7.50"
CHARACTER NAME:	Left Margin: 3.50" Right Margin: 7.25"
PARANTHETICAL:	Left Margin: 3.00" Right Margin: 5.50"
DIALOGUE:	Left Margin: 2.50" Right Margin: 6.00"
TRANSITIONS:	Left Margin: 5.50"

There are several reasons for this:

- When screenplays are formatted correctly, one page translates, on average, into one minute of screen time so you can tell whether your story is the right length
- Readers and producers do not like it when writers pretend their screenplay is shorter than it is by stretching the margins or using a tighter font
- Formatting helps readers check at a glance whether you are writing too much dialogue or describing things in too much detail
- Formatting helps readers compare one script with another without being distracted by fancy typefaces.

Remember: Ask a friend to read through your screenplay to check that everything makes sense. Sometimes when you are in the middle of writing a screenplay, it becomes difficult to see which parts of the story are clear and which are not. Making a film is a collaborative business from beginning to end, so don't be afraid to ask for comments and suggestions.

Another important thing to remember about screenplays is that they are always read before they are filmed. And they are usually read, not by a producer or an agent, but by a reader.

Most readers usually look for reasons not to pass your script up to the next level. (Many readers are frustrated, un-produced writers. It could even be said they are envious of anyone who actually finishes a script under consideration.)

When you have spent so much time and hard work perfecting your product, you want it to get a fair look. The only way to do that is with a professional presentation.

Don't give the reader an excuse to pass over your script by not preparing it according to industry standards. **Don't** add creative flourishes such as artwork, or colored inks or paper. Put your creativity on the page and let the words sell your screenplay.

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FORMATTING YOUR SCREENPLAY

There are essential screenplay format elements. This means writing a screenplay in a special layout with the story divided into:

(1) THE SCENE HEADING (INT OR EXT, LOCATION, TIME)

The scene heading is positioned on your first indent, one-and-a-half inches in from the left hand side of the page and is always all capitalized. This shows where the action takes place and at what time eg:

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     INT. THE HALLS OF MOIRA. NIGHT.
or:
     EXT. MOUNTAIN PASS. DAY.
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(2) THE VISUAL EXPOSITION (ACTION) or what you would see on screen or short sentences describing what the camera is pointing at and what the actors should be doing in frame, eg:

```
     He jumps from the tailgate of the truck. His feet SLAP down
     on the tarmac.
```

Visual exposition should line up below the Scene Heading at the same indent position, one-and-a-half inches in from the left hand side of the page. Visual exposition should be single-spaced. Note: do not use camera directions in your descriptions (such as PAN right, ANGLE ON etc.) (Another note: distinctive sounds are always capitalized to assist the sound recordist and sound designer.)

(3) THE DIALOGUE

The Dialogue follows the visual exposition, with each character's name CAPITALIZED in the center of the page (but only the first time he or she appears in the script), followed by the words that are to be spoken, on the next line, centered with the left and right margins approximately two inches in from each side of the page. Do not include emotional or physical direction in parentheses below a character's name before the lines of dialogue.

(4) PARENTHETICALS – are adverbs that tell the actors how they should say their lines. These should only be used when the way the actor says something goes against their normal way of speaking or the emotion of the situation; they are saying something with a particular emphasis; or there is no other way of writing it. For example:

```
                    FRODO
               (screws up his courage)
          I will take the Ring to Mordor!
```

(5) REACTION SHOTS – that tell the other actors how they should react to what other characters do or say. For example, `GANDALF beams with delight`. Please note, reaction shots are as important as dialogue and are often left out by new writers.

(6) TRANSITIONS – words that tell the director when to cut from one scene to the next to move the story forward, (e.g. `CUT TO: ; CROSSFADE TO: ; FADE OUT`)

FORMATTING A SCRIPT: THE RULES

There are rules to the formatting of a script. Format your screenplay correctly and it could reach the production stage. Don't format correctly and it will never be read!

1. The slug line establishes the location. It's daytime and we are outside in the mountains of Montana.

2. After double spacing, write your description from margin to margin.

3. After another double space you can suggest a change in camera focus.

4. Another double space and we move inside the vehicle and focus on the character driving.

5. A new character is always capitalized.

6. Characters speaking are always capitalized.

7. Parentheticals or stage directions for the actors are always in small letters beneath the character's name. Don't over do this: it is patronizing to the actor to tell them how to read a line. That is their job or the director's.

8. Dialogue is centered and single-spaced.

9. Stage directions for the actors to do within the scene, even if it tells them to do nothing at all.

10. Sound effects and music effects are always capitalized. The last step in the film making process is to provide the film music and sound effects. Once the film is 'locked', meaning the picture track cannot be changed or altered, the sound and special effects editors go through the script looking for their cues. The capitalization helps in their search.

11. You may choose to end the scene with a 'Cut to' or a 'Dissolve to' (where one image fades and another overlaps as it fades in) or a fade to black, 'Fade Out'. It is

understood when a scene ends and a new one begins there is a cut involved, so you do not have to include it in your script.

Dissolves are usually used to indicate a passage of time. For instance, in one scene your character may tell his mother he is going to be a professional athlete in two years. This would then dissolve to the same character in a tracksuit on a field. However, these decisions belong to the editor or the director, not the writer.

PREPARING YOUR SCRIPT

Never submit your original. Make copies on three-hole punched white paper and submit them, keeping a copy for yourself. Make sure your copies are clean and easy to read. Take your 5 pages of three-hole punched white paper and place them between heavy bond three-hole punch papers. Use brass brads to secure the script between the covers.

TITLE PAGE

Put the title in capital letters, in quotes and underline it. It should be centered and about two and a half inches from the top of the page. Centered eight to 10 spaces below that is ‘Written by’ or ‘Screenplay by’, and four spaces below that is the author’s name.

In the bottom right hand corner put the author’s name and contact information such as address, phone and email. Never put a date on your script. It may take years for it to find a home and you don’t want prospective buyers to think it’s been around for any length of time.

FIRST PAGE
The title is centred in ‘quotation marks’ at the top of the page. Double spaced, then FADE IN: at the left margin. Double space, then the first scene begins. Even though the three-act structure is generally favoured, do not indicate act breaks in your script.

CAPITALIZATIONS
The following are always all in capital letters:

- INT. (Interior), EXT. (Exterior), for the scene location
- DAY/NIGHT
- A NEW CHARACTER, the first time they are introduced in the narrative
- SHOTS, CAMERA DIRECTIONS, SOUNDS (EFFECTS)

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LINE SPACING

Single Space:

- The narrative, which includes scene description, character actions, camera directions, and sound cues
- Between the character's name and dialogue
- The dialogue itself

Double Space:

- Between the scene location and the narrative
- Between the narrative and the character's name above the dialogue
- Between the speeches of the different characters
- Between the paragraphs of long narrative passages

Triple Space:

- Before starting a new scene

PARENTHETICALS

Always submit a script in the same language as that spoken by the reader who will hopefully read it. If characters speak a foreign language in your script, write the dialogue in English. Then you indicate that it's spoken in French, Italian, Spanish, etc. in the parenthetical below the character's name.

Another use for parentheticals is to indicate a pause or a beat to the actor. Place '(pause)' or '(beat)' beneath the character's name before the dialogue. Use this very sparingly because it is insulting to the actor and the director.

SHOT LIST

These are ways to find the subject of your shot.

1. ANGLE ON: a person, place or thing, i.e. ANGLE ON TOM climbing into his tractor.

2. FAVORING: a person, place or thing i.e. FAVORING the driver of the ambulance.

3. ANOTHER ANGLE: from another point of view.

4. WIDER ANGLE: A change of focus in a scene. You shift from a CU (Close UP) of Tom in his tractor, to a PULL BACK, which includes the tractor.

5. NEW ANGLE: often used to break up the page for a more ‘cinematic look’ i.e. of Tom driving the tractor.

6. POV: A person’s Point Of View i.e. ANGLE ON TOM approaching the horse, or from horse’s POV of Tom approaching.

7. REVERSE POV: see Point Six above, what the horse sees.

8. OVER THE SHOULDER SHOT: Usually the back of a character’s head is in the foreground of the frame, what they’re looking at is in the background.

9. MOVING: focuses on the movement of a shot. Tom’s tractor MOVES across the field.

10. CLOSE SHOT: used sparingly and only for emphasis. (ECU), EXTREME CLOSE UP etc, used in animation only.

11. INSERT: a close shot of something important for emphasis i.e. a clock, map, weapon.

From Character to Plot

Some screenwriting gurus will tell you that the main thing you need to know about your character is what they want. But equally important is the question of what they are going to have to do to get what they want.

Sometimes it is easy to see the difference. For instance in *The Lord of the Rings,* Frodo wants to destroy the ring, but Gandalf tells him the only place it can be destroyed is in Mount Doom. So what does he have to do? He has to travel to the other side of Middle Earth to Mordor and drop it in the volcano. This is his quest (or challenge) and it’s summed up perfectly by Sam at the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* when he says words to the effect of, “Mordor, the one place we don’t want to be is the one place we’ve got to get to.”

Sometimes what a character wants and what they have to do to get it may appear to be the same (e.g. in a sports movie where a character wants to be world champion). But even in these types of movie there is a very important difference between the two questions. For instance, in *Billy Elliot (*which could be described as *Rocky* in ballet shoes), Billy decides he wants to go to ballet lessons. This is what he wants. But what is he going to have to do to get it? He must overcome his shyness and his fear about what other people think in order to succeed.

In both of the above examples, the writers and screenwriters have put huge barriers

in the way of their heroes. If a character's challenge was easy there would be no story. Take *Notting Hill* for instance: imagine if Anna walked into William Thacker's life and everything went swimmingly - no press scrum outside the house the next day, no mad friend dancing in his Y-fronts, no film star ex-boyfriend, no misunderstandings - and no movie!

The whole enjoyment of watching any type of movie is watching a sympathetic lead character getting themselves into big trouble, trying to extract themselves only to be pulled in deeper, before they find a surprising, entertaining and believable way to finally resolve their difficulties.

So before you commit to any character or story line, analyze your story idea and try to answer as many questions about your character to check they are the perfect person for your plot: Ask:

• Who is s/he?
• What problems does s/he already face in his or her life?
• What does s/he want?
• What will s/he be forced to do to get what s/he wants?
• What is his/her moral weakness or character flaw?
• What does s/he fear most?
• Who is his/her main opponent?

• How does the opponent attack his/her weakness?
• How does the lead character confront his/her greatest fear?
• What will s/he learn during the story?
• How does what s/he learns resolve the conflict between what s/he wants, what s/he needs to learn and what s/he has had to do to get it?
• How does the story end?

If you have a very clear idea of what forces drive your lead character you will be well on your way to create what Screenwriters and Producers call a 'Character-driven' story.

Suspense is one of the most misunderstood dramatic terms. It usually refers to those tense moments in horror movies and thrillers, when a character walks down a long corridor not knowing which room the chainsaw wielding maniac will jump out of.

However, Aristotle defined suspense as much more than an immediate visual trick: he believed that suspense is created when the drama makes an audience feel a powerful sense of pity for the hero's undeserved suffering, because only then can the audience truly sympathize (and identify) with the hero, and fear for what might happen to him next. As soon as audiences know more than the characters in the

movie (usually because they are also privy to the actions of opponents or lovers that the characters themselves are not), they can feel pity and fear (or even terror) for what is about to happen to that character, and experience extreme tension about whether the character will recognize what is going on in time to prevent a tragedy. This is the real meaning of dramatic suspense and is also known by the term dramatic (or comic) irony.

EXERCISE: Try writing your story as a single paragraph showing the emotional journey that your character will go on as they overcome their weaknesses and fears. Write down who the lead character is, what the situation is, what s/he wants, what s/he does, what problems s/he encounters and how s/he has to change by the end. Then try doing it for the other characters: when you have a clear idea about what motivates them, you will see where each of them will come into conflict with your lead character.

Set-Up, Conflict, Resolution

Screen stories are all about questions and answers - questions and answers. At the story level you must ask:

• What is my story really about?
• What do I want to say?
• What is the story's big hook?
• What makes it cinematic (or televisual)?

• Why is it way better than anything else I've seen?
• Would I pay to see it?

At the character level you must ask:

Complication:

Setup
• Who is my lead character?
• What do they want?
• How can I show what they want?
• What do they need to learn about the world or themselves in order to get what they want?
• How can I demonstrate visually what they need?

Increasing Conflict
• Who opposes them?
• How do they attack the lead character and expose their weaknesses?
• Why is the lead character resistant to change, reluctant to confront their weakness?

• How does the level of conflict increase?
• What makes the conflict personal?
• Does the conflict become obsessive and force even friends to start deserting the lead character? (if not it should!)
• How is the lead character finally forced to confront their weakness and contemplate internal change?

Unravelling:

Resolution
• Why does the lead character come back for one last attempt to defeat their opponent?
• Do they still want what they did at the beginning, or are they beginning to understand that they will never win unless they change their goal or their attitude to life?
• What moral choices that they have to make in the final struggle will finally externalize their inner struggle between what they want and what they need?
• How does the lead character close the divide between what they want and what they need in the climax and resolution of the movie?

The more you write the more you realize that before you write a word of dialogue, it is important to interrogate your story to check whether it can be all it can be. Ask as many questions as you can about your story before you start and the chances are you will have a better map of your own ideas from which to build an engaging dramatic story.

EXERCISE: To help you plan your story, try breaking the idea down into these elements to check that you are on track and to see if it prompts any new or better ideas.

1) Introduce your lead character and setting
    a) Who is s/he and where is s/he?
    b) What is his or her life like?
    c) Who is with him/her?
2) What does s/he want? - The lead character finds out or reveals that s/he wants something, or discovers s/he has a problem that must be solved.
3) **What does s/he need to learn?** – The character needs to learn something to make them a better human being. This is usually similar to what they want, but crucially different from it. (e.g. In *Intolerable Cruelty* Miles Massey wants to capture Marylin Rexroth's heart but he needs to work out that a marriage is more than just a legal contract).
4) Initial actions - The character then sets out to solve his/her problem or get what s/he wants. Because they don't understand that what they want is not what they need, the lead character finds that instead of getting what they want they are

in a world of trouble. (e.g. Because Miles Massey doesn't understand the difference between love and marriage, Marylin Rexroth sets out to con him into marriage, to bankrupt and humiliate him)
5) **First Major setback** - Unfortunately your lead character also needs to learn something about life and because of this they are about to find themselves in more trouble than they have ever encountered.
6) **Actions & Set-backs** - Because s/he is not aware of what it is s/he *really* needs, s/he will usually go about getting what s/he wants the wrong way. This will bring him/her into conflict with other people (both enemies and friends) who don't like what s/he is doing - or the way s/he is going about it. The result is a series of actions and setbacks throughout the middle of the story.
7) **Increasing Conflict** - the arguments and fights become increasingly heated towards the end of the middle section. Now here's the cool bit:

> a) If the story has a positive outcome, the conflict will reach a head and it will look like the lead character has been defeated (e.g. in *Intolerable Cruelty*, Miles Massey marries Marylin only for her then to turn round and sue him for everything he has got)
> b) If the story has a negative outcome, the conflict will intensify until it looks like the hero is close to victory (e.g. in *Braveheart* it looks like Wallace will defeat the English once and for all but then he is betrayed by the nobles including Robert the Bruce)

8) **Final Struggle** - The lead character summons his/her strength for a final attempt to achieve his/her goal.
9) **Endings** - Whether the lead character succeeds or fails, s/he discovers from what's happened that what they thought they wanted in the beginning was only part of the truth, and there is more to life than they thought.

Writing Dialogue

I have left writing dialogue until quite late in this guide for the simple reason that it is not something you should really start to do until you are really sure about the structure of your story and the way it will look on the screen. To state the obvious, movies are primarily about moving images, where the sound design and dialogue support the image and not the reverse. It is therefore more important to know where your imaginary camera is pointing and what the purpose of each scene is before you decide what needs to be said and what does not. If you write a scene of dialogue between two people without knowing what the scene needs to do to move the story forward, then it quickly starts to resemble a ping-pong match with no foreseeable end, and the audience may lose interest in what is being said.

The most important thing therefore is to work out whose scene it is and what that character wants out of that scene. You then need to concentrate on the visual elements of the scene to work out how the characters will interact physically, and only then do you start to write dialogue that will achieve your purpose. And, as a

general rule, the less dialogue you write the better!

Once you are clear about what needs to happen in the scene and the overall look and feel, you can start to write your dialogue.

But what makes good dialogue?

Dialogue has a number of key functions to move a story forward:

- it needs to reveal character motivation and help explain why they act as they do, and what they learn during the course of the story.
- it needs to give the audience key information about the context and setting of the story,
- and thirdly and least importantly (unless you are writing a comedy), it needs to entertain.

To write good dialogue you should know your characters so well you can think like them and know what they would say based on their specific desires and needs, interests and contradictions. This is why it is so important to ask the basic motivation questions about all your characters and build up an active character description of who they are and how they think (see the section Describing Characters).

To help you master dialogue, here are a few useful pointers:
- Think in character, understand their motives and background in each scene – ask what does each person want?
- Establish who is the lead character in each scene and ask: what do they want?

And will they get it?
- Then order your dialogue around these questions and what the main active question is in the current scene.
- Write as though for a particular actor.
- Get some friends around to read scripts aloud – then rewrite the scene to see if you can make it better.

If you still find that all your characters sound alike, try restricting their vocabularies (e.g. allow Jeff only to use Plain English words like talk and choose, and allow Dr Morris to use more Latin-based words like communicate and decide); give them different idiosyncrasies (e.g. Sally never finishes a sentence, Doris always finishes other people's) or give each character distinct slang expressions to use (e.g. ‘by the way’, ‘pure magic’, or ‘actually, darling’). Restricting what characters are allowed to say can help you focus on who they really are and what they want. You’re just coming at it from a different angle.

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EXERCISE: Choose a scene of verbal confrontation from one of your favorite films and transcribe it in screenplay format describing both the actions you see and the words that are spoken. Note carefully how the actors move in the scene and how you might describe who is in control at different points in the scene. The ability to give the director and actors a sense of how the scene will play visually is an integral part of good screenwriting.

Subtext and 'on-the-nose' dialogue

When you listen to people talking at work, or on the bus, they almost never say what they are really thinking. There is therefore no reason to have people in movies say exactly what they are thinking either, except during those few big confrontation scenes where your characters finally tell each other what they really think.

As a screenwriter you need to find ways for characters to reveal to the audience what they are thinking, without using obvious, 'on-the-nose' dialogue, and without necessarily giving the same information to the other characters in the scene. This hidden information is called subtext and is extremely entertaining for the audience, since it adds extra layers of meaning to the action. Some of the characters in the scene may be aware of some of these layers of meaning, but rarely all of them. This often places the audience in a privileged position, where they know more about (or think they know more about) what is going on than the characters.

When the audience has privileged information about what is going on they are able to sympathize even more with the lead character (or enjoy the comeuppance of opponents or comic characters). This helps build suspense (or comic anticipation) about what is likely to happen, and how you the screenwriter will resolve the difficult predicament created for the characters. Subtext also allows actors to explore the character of the person they are playing, which further intensifies our enjoyment of the film.

A good example of subtext occurs in *The Two Towers* when Frodo is captured by Faramir. The audience knows that Frodo has the ring, that Faramir is Boromir's brother, that Boromir was hungry for power, and we suspect that Faramir may be too. We quickly realize that Frodo is in a very difficult position because if he does not explain who he is, Faramir may think he is working for Sauron, while if he does he risks revealing he is the ring bearer, and Faramir may try to steal it like his brother. These underlying narrative elements make the scene rich in subtext and very tense. Frodo manages to wriggle his way through this difficult conversation, though after Gollum is caught stealing fish from the sacred pool he has to come clean. With the truth of his mission revealed, it seems that Faramir will indeed steal the ring as his brother intended. However, then the Nazgul arrive and Faramir is wise enough to see that the ring cannot be controlled and must be destroyed.

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Exposition is defined as the critical information necessary to understand the plot. Exposition is always necessary at the beginning of the film where the writer needs to communicate to the audience where we are, who the characters are and what they have been doing up to now. When critics talk about there being 'too much exposition' in a film, they usually mean that it has been handled obviously and sounds false. The trick as a writer is to think very carefully about what you really need to tell the audience for them to understand what is going on. Then think of all the possible ways you can give the audience information through visual clues. When you cannot find a way to tell the audience using a visual, try to bury the exposition in scenes of emotional conflict, humor or spectacle (as is done at the start of *The Fellowship of the Ring* when Galadriel tells us the story of Sauron and the Ring of Power). This way the audience will be distracted by more important business and not notice you are feeding them important – and potentially boring - information along the way.

EXERCISES: Here are a few simple exercises you can try to help you improve your dialogue writing and your understanding of subtext:

- Write a scene where one character tells another a story without realizing that the other person already knows what happened; concentrate on how the other person reacts and responds.
- Write a conversation in which the characters are so excited that no one finishes a sentence.
- Write a scene with one person trying to tell another that they love them, but being too afraid to say it straight for fear of being rejected.
- Write a Hitchcock style scene with two people talking intercut with another scene showing the police about to raid the house they are in. How much tension can you create?
- Write a scene about a young child describing a fight between their parents without knowing what it was really about.
- Write a wedding scene where lots of relatives are giving different versions of what the bride and groom are really like.

Rewriting

Most writing is rewriting. A screenplay by its very nature is a blueprint for a movie, so by definition it can never be truly finished. As soon as a producer, funder or actor comes aboard a project, the screenwriter will be expected to make changes to accommodate any number of things, from alterations to the setting or budget, to the specific desires of any of the other people involved. For some, this can be an intimidating and difficult process, but the more you understand what your screenplay is really about, the greater the chances are you will be able to defend what is really important and make changes which improve the story rather than damage or compromise it.

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Since the writer is always rewriting, the most important rewrite of all is the first rewrite - which you will often make on your own and in isolation. This is the time when you assess whether you have fulfilled the promise of your premise, synopsis, beat outline, step outline (and sometimes treatment) or not.

If you are not happy with your rough draft – and the chances are you won't be – you need to be able to analyze your own work to find out where it is working and where it is not. This is not easy, but you should by now have many of the tools needed to really interrogate your own work and see where improvements can be made.

Sometimes rewriting is a painful process because it can mean going back to the beginning and starting again. But rest assured no work you will have done on a project is ever truly lost. Indeed, even if you throw the whole screenplay out it will inform the rewrite.

The rewrite therefore encompasses two main stages:

a) identifying the problems,
b) fixing them in the correct order

Identifying the problems
So what's the problem?
You've finished the script and something isn't right. But you don't know what it is – let alone how to fix it. Problem is that even with a well planned script certain aspects of the story will change through the telling. Some of these things will be for the better and some for the worse.

Characters do develop a life of their own and sometimes they will surprise you. Sometimes you find you are writing two movies simultaneously and need to strip one out. So how do you analyze your narrative and identify the problems.

First look for the obvious big problems:
Do you now know what the story is about? Or are you still confused?
Are you writing a cohesive movie? Or are you writing two or more competing narratives from different genres?

Concept:
• Does the story still have the x-factor you thought it did? (i.e. Is the concept clear or not?
• What does the movie poster look like?
• Would you pay to see this film?

Structure and form:
• Look at the ending: Does the story have a positive or negative ending?

• Is the story properly structured to deliver that ending?
• Is the form appropriate to the aims of the story? (e.g. Could you tell this story a different way? Would it be less clumsy without the narrator? Does it really need to be an ensemble piece?)

Theme:
• What moral choices does the lead character make (particularly at the end)?
• Has the lead character changed in a meaningful way and how? (Have you shown this properly through action)
• Has the theme changed since you started? (What's the poster strap-line?)
• Is the task sufficiently testing to challenge your lead character's weaknesses to the full? (i.e. Has the inner conflict been successfully externalized?)

Character:
• Have you written a passive lead character who is reacting rather than acting?
• Are the character's actions credible or do they jump unbelievably?
• Have the subplots become more interesting than main plots?
• Has a secondary character become more interesting than the lead character you started with?
• Are the lead character's motivations clear?

• Do you know what s/he wants and what s/he will have to do to get it?
• Do you know what s/he really needs to find out about him or herself by the end, and whether they will realize it in time or not?
• Do you set your lead character a big enough challenge or place them in an almost impossible predicament? (if not why not)
• Are you sure you have picked the right character to be challenged by your predicament?
• Can the character be weakened to make the challenge more difficult?
• Can you intensify the character's problems, weakness and greatest fear?
• Remember: the gap between what the lead character wants and what they really need creates the opportunity for the antagonist to attack.

Opponent:
• Do you know who your opponent is and why they are appropriate to this movie?
• Does the main opponent make the lead character jump through sufficiently large hoops?
• Does the opponent exploit the lead character's weakness to the full?
• The main opponent should have similar wants to the lead character – that is why the love interest can be defined as the main opponent in a romance or a romantic subplot because they want and need similar but crucially different versions of the same things: love and sex.
• Is the opponent too easy to beat?
• How has the opponent exposed the lead character's weaknesses and forced

him/her to change?
• Can you make the opponent stronger and still deliver a believable ending?
• Does the final struggle provide a satisfying conclusion to their struggle?

Secondary characters:
• Do you have too many secondary characters? (this is a frequent problem with screenplays which move between two worlds)
• Does each subplot complement the main plot? (or do they operate independently from each other)
• How does each subplot relate to the central theme?

The Audience:
• Are you aware how the audience will be made to feel at each stage in the story and why?
• Do you hook the audience properly at the beginning?
• Do you give them a big finish at the end?
• Does the story twist in interesting and unexpected ways in between?
• Are you using all the main dramatic tools at your disposal to their most telling effect?
  o Dramatic Tension – this is when the audience sees the narrative through the actor's eyes
  o Suspense (a.k.a. dramatic irony) – this is when the audience knows more than the character, sympathizes with them and therefore starts to pity them and fear for them in drama, or contrariwise enjoy anticipating their discomfort in a comedy.
  o Mystery – this is when the audience knows less than the character (e.g. at the beginning of a movie and the start of every sequence or scene)
  o Surprise and Reversals – have you constructed the back stories, motives and needs of your characters, so they can act towards each other in surprising and revealing ways which will energize and refresh your story.
  o Genre irony – this is when the audience knows more than the character because they know what type of movie the character is in where the character does not. Are you delivering therefore an original twist on the audience's plot expectations or are you merely serving up genre clichés? Genre expectation also relates to the specific mix of dramatic tools you use in any specific genre (e.g. contrary to popular belief a thriller usually relies more on dramatic tension, surprise and genre irony than true Aristotelian suspense).
  o Cinematic irony (a.k.a suspension of disbelief) – In one sense an audience always knows more than the character by virtue of the fact that they are watching a movie, whereas the character believes they are real. Do you have a clear vision of how the

audience will relate to your story, or are you alerting them too often to the fact that they are watching a movie and thereby distancing them from the cinematic experience. Movie references can be very effective in certain types of films (particularly comedies), but used inappropriately they can really damage the audience's enjoyment.

Plotting:
• Is the plotting credible?
• Is the plotting clever with unexpected twists and turns? Or is it wholly predictable?
• Is there a point in the plot that is far too convenient and does not spring from cause and effect in the character motivation?
• Do you rely too much on coincidence? If so remove it, remember you are only allowed one obvious coincidence which usually occurs near the start of the movie, any more and you are short-changing the audience.
• Does the story lack suspense? (have you set the story up to make the lead character interesting enough to engage with? Does s/he "suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune"? If not, why not? We need to sympathise with him/her.)
• Is the pace uneven?
• Do all the characters weave into the story properly or are some left hanging?
• Does your ending deliver on the promise of the main active questions in surprising ways? (i.e. do you solve all the issues)

Sequences and scenes:
• Can you identify the purpose of each scene?
• Is each sequence driven by an overriding question that must be answered?
• Have you properly alerted the audience to this imperative?
• Do you enter on a question, do battle over it, resolve it and set a new one?
• Are your scenes linked properly into sequences with active questions or do you kill the pace by overwriting and not cutting away early enough to propel the action ?
• Does each scene have a beginning, a middle and an end?
• Do scenes develop in surprising ways or are they a bit predictable?
• Do sequences end with intersections from sub-plots, to reinvigorate the main plot?

Action and visual style:
• Are you in control of your visual style?
• Are you viewing the whole story through an imaginary camera, or are you writing for the stage?
• Is the narrative visually interesting?
• Is your POV system clear or is your camera flitting around between characters like a lost dog?
• Are you writing what people reveal about themselves through action - or are you trying to describe the thoughts inside people's heads and giving the actors impossibly complex lines?

Screenplay Guidelines and Tips

prepared by Janaki Cedanna

Dialogue:
• Is the dialogue economical and does it support the action? (or vice versa?)
• Is dialogue rich in subtext or blunt and on-the-nose?
• Is the tone consistent?
• Are characters' speech patterns distinct from each other?
• Do some characters have too much dialogue and others too little?
• Are you giving the best lines to your lead characters? Your actors will kill you if you aren't.

'Breaking the Fourth Wall' refers to the idea of unnecessarily reminding the audience that they are watching a movie, instead of allowing them to be absorbed into the cinematic world. The 'Fourth Wall' in this sense is the screen that separates the audience from the action. It can be broken when characters address the camera; through excessive and unmotivated use of narration; hammy acting; onthe-nose dialogue; unnecessary 'smarts'; overt and gratuitous cinematic referencing; the appearance of the director on screen; rogue booms, poor continuity, etc. 'Breaking the Fourth Wall' is a more acceptable conceit in ironic comedies (e.g. *Blazing Saddles,* or *Pulp Fiction*), but can lessen an audience's enjoyment of drama unless handled with great delicacy. Sometimes, a film can be structured in such a way that the 'Fourth Wall' can be broken to good effect (e.g. *Alfie*). The general rule of thumb for breaking the 'Fourth Wall' is that the device (e.g. addressing the camera) should be motivated by the nature of the story (e.g. it's a confessional) and used consistently throughout the film.

EXERCISE: Analyze your draft screenplay using the checklist above. Give yourself marks out of ten for each question. This may sound daft but giving yourself a score will help you identify where you are strong and where you need to concentrate your rewriting efforts.

Rewrite in stages

Having identified the problems in your screenplay it can be tempting to correct areas as you discover them. However, it is often more productive to stage the rewrite, since there's no reason to fix the dialogue if there is a structural problem that may require more major surgery. Different screenwriters have different ways of going about this, but here is a way that works for me.

Step 1 - Structure: Plots and sequences.
• Check the ducks really line up: plot out the emotional arc of your story.
• Check whether the drama increases in intensity through the story up to the final resolution.
• Check your themes are appropriate to the genre or genre mix.
• If you are testing genre boundaries, gauge how an audience is likely to feel when they discover they have been misled – and how much of the audience you might lose as a result? Genre boundaries can be broken but it is more difficult to do well

than it looks. For instance, in *Psycho* Hitchcock pulled the biggest genre busting trick of all time, but he understood clearly that he could only make it swing if we didn't like the seeming heroine too much. Thus he goes out of his way to make us feel ambivalent about her in the first half of the movie. We feel the dramatic tension of the situation but we don't feel real suspense (pity and fear for her), so when she is killed we can move on to our new lead character, Norman Bates, shocked but not emotionally gutted.
• Map out in a beat outline or diagrammatic form the main active questions at story and sequence level. Do you understand how these drive the story?
• Do the same for your subplots and identify how these intersect with the main plot.
• Check that your theme is nailed into the narrative in the set-up and conclusion of your story. (e.g. Cold Mountain is very good at reminding us both at the beginning and the end that this story is about how one spark of fleeting love when properly cherished is ultimately more powerful than war)

Step 2 - Characters: make them all they can be
• Write down in one sentence the motivation and arc of each character and lay them out in order of importance in a matrix: what do they want, what do they need to find out about themselves, what is their weakness, what do they have to do to try and get what they want and how will they change by the end of the story? For example Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* might be *synopsised* in this fashion:

- o Don Corleone is a powerful but ageing Don who takes a moral stance against drugs and is badly wounded in an ambush (and forced to abdicate as Don).
- o The emotional daughter Connie marries Carlo, a pretty boy opportunist who betrays the family.
- o An ambitious Turkish gangster attempts to assassinate the Don for the rival New York families.
- o Sonny, the hot-headed eldest son, launches a full-blown gang war and ends up dead.
- o The second son Fredo hasn't the brains or the bottle to take over and becomes envious of his younger brother.
- o McClusky, the corrupt police captain, helps the Turk but ends up dead.
- o Tom Hagen, the adopted son, is pressurised to betray the family but remains loyal.
- o Kay, a good American girl, believes Michael can change and ends up destroying her life.
- o Michael, the idealistic third son in a crime family, avenges his father's attack and becomes the new Don of Dons.

• Try to find ways of intensifying the conflict between what characters want and what they need, as well as between each other.
• See if you can push your characters' conflicts to greater extremes (without

damaging their emotional credibility).
• Check that each character is clearly drawn and introduced at an appropriate dramatic moment.
• Be honest with yourself and ask whether each character is emotionally believable - and do the change in a credible way as a result of what happens to them (cause and effect)?
• Try to think of ways to make them more active, more interesting and more watchable. Give them things to do.

Step 3 - Sequences and scenes
• Identify the active questions for each sequence.
• Identify the active questions in each scene and check that they build through the sequence.
• Check you have a similar number of scenes in each sequence.
• Check each sequence has a proper climax and work out the best way to lead in to the next sequence (remember this dramatic impetus often comes from subplots that have been bubbling away off-screen)
• Check that the intensity of the questioning rises with each successive sequence (e.g. *Intolerable Cruelty*, Will Miles Massey defeat Marylin in Court? Will he persuade her to fall for him? Can he dissuade her from marriage to Howard Doyle? Will Marylin call for Miles? Will he marry her? Can he save his reputation and fortune? Can he save her life? Will they find true love?)
• Check the scenes have a cohesive sense of pace and rhythm and aren't clogged with unnecessary dialogue based scenes.
• Check that the dramatic nature of each sequence is in keeping with the overriding genre expectations.
• Make sure you incorporate aftermath scenes at the end of each sequence to allow the audience time to digest what is going on.

Step 4 - Scenes, action and dialogue
• Dramatize each scene to ensure that it has an active question, a clear emotional structure and a clear purpose. And be honest here!
• Check who is driving the scene and who is opposing them.
• Make sure you understand what the lead character wants and what they need in each scene, and that the main opponent attacks them in an unexpected but appropriate fashion.
• Check that you enter and exit each scene on a clear question and don't hang about unnecessarily.
• If a scene is unnecessary and adds little to the story structure seriously consider cutting it.
• Check the scenes are active and that the dialogue supports the action and not the reverse.
• Check that dialogue is revealing character and that exposition is disguised with emotional conflict.

• Check that every word has a purpose as well as a meaning.
• If you are writing a comedy – check that each scene is funny.

Step 5 - The polish
• Once all the other steps are complete read the screenplay through again and then concentrate upon improving your description of action to give the screenplay a good sense of style and pace.
• Check once more whether you need all that dialogue or whether you could say it better with a look. It's sounds like an old movie cliché, but if you analyse most good movies people say a lot less than you probably think they do.
Step 6 - The proof
• Proof read your work. Punctuation and typos do count.
• Look out especially for character name changes.
• Discrepancies in scene headings (e.g. sometimes you call it MIKE'S HOUSE and at others MIKE'S APARTMENT etc.).
• Number discrepancies that have built up through the writing (e.g. the ransom started off as 1 million but you later decided to make it a more realistic 50K).

Step 7 - Final Read Through
• You must know what every word in your screenplay is there for and why. You must also be sure that there are no words missing that are necessary to explain the story to reader, director or producer.

Only once a rough draft has been fully rewritten do you have a First Draft screenplay and it remains a First Draft screenplay, however many times you rewrite it, until it is in development with a production company. Do not write Draft 17 on the front unless your project is in funded production.

The Top Ten Tips for Writing Short Screenplays

1. Know who you're making your film for. If you're making it for yourself, that's who you have to satisfy. If you're making it as an entry into the industry, your film needs to work dramatically as well as technically. Competition is stiff.

2. The longer the story, the better the film has to be. Length comes down to what the story dictates. But if a film is over 15 minutes, it really has to be great to keep people watching. I can't tell you how many boring "short" films I've seen because directors can't figure out what they can cut to make it better.

3. Write the script you can produce. Don't write a script with production values you can't achieve.

4. The best ideas are simple. Focus on one main conflict, then develop and explore it in surprising ways.

5. Set up your film in the first 60 seconds. If you're writing a ten-minute (10 page) movie, you can't take the first five pages to introduce your characters before getting to your conflict. Establish your conflict as soon as possible.

6. Make sure conflict escalates. Know what your character wants (the goal) and what's preventing him from getting it (the obstacle), and make sure your audience understands it, too.

7. Try to develop the conflict in one main incident as the set piece of your project. Many great short films develop the conflict in one incident to great effect, exploring character in ways feature films rarely do because they rely more heavily on plot.

8. If your film is less than five minutes, one type of conflict might be sufficient to satisfy your audience. But if your film is over five minutes, you're going to need to various obstacles or complications for your hero to face.

9. Just because your film is short doesn't mean it's impossible to have an effective midpoint and reversal. Anything that keeps your audience from guessing your ending is an asset.

10. Make sure your ending is the best thing about your great film. Your payoff is what you're leaving the audience with, and it's how they're going to remember you.

View and download Hollywood film scripts at Drew's Script-O-Rama

http://www.script-o-rama.com/table.shtml

This Screenwriting Packet is a compilation of my thoughts, training and experience as well as the following brilliant writers:

(Excerpted from “Writing a Short Screenplay” by Professor Elisabeth Benfey, Creative Screenwriting 10/10/06)
(Excerpted from “The Collaborative Art of Storytelling in Film” by Emma Rogers)
(Excerpted from “A short-cut to Hollywood Success” by Linda Cowgill, Creative Screenwriting 05/11/2004)
(Excerpted from “A Crash Course in Screenwriting” by David Griffith)