

SCREENWRITING ESSENTIALS

Syllabus

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“Meditation is the act of meditation.”
Sogyal Rimpoche

Writing is the act of writing.

“I don’t know who discovered water but I doubt it was a fish.”

Some basic questions: What distinguishes us from other mammals?
Is it consciousness? Memory? Time? Civilization? Romantic Love?
Technology? Science? Religion? Metaphor? The ability to tell stories?

And what distinguishes us – our stories, our beliefs, our paradigms - from other cultures?

Why do we tell stories?

But why do you write?— A: I am not one of those who think with an inky pen in their hand, much less one of those who in front of an open inkwell abandon themselves to their passions while they sit in a chair and stare at the paper. I am annoyed by and ashamed of my writing; writing is for me a pressing and embarrassing need, and to speak of it even in a parable disgusts me. B: But why, then, do you write? A: We, my friend, to be quite frank: so far, I have not discovered any other way of getting rid of my thoughts. B: And why do you want to get rid of them?— B: Enough! Enough!

Nietzsche *The Gay Science*, Section 93

How are narratives constructed?

NARRATIVE - A chain of events in a cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space. A filmic narrative is made up of all the events that we see and hear, plus all those that we infer or assume to have occurred, arranged in their presumed causal relations, chronological order, duration, frequency, and spatial locations. Opposed to narration, which is the film's actual presentation of certain events in the narrative.

NARRATION - the process through which a film conveys or withholds narrative information, the way a story is told. Narration concerns the actual arrangement and presentation of the story in the film, the way in which the film distributes story information in order to achieve specific effects. The “framing” of the story.

Director Jonathan Demme says, “Start the movie as late as possible; start each scene as late as possible.”

The narration and narrator’s voice in literature is either in the...

1st person – “I”

2nd person – “you”

or 3rd person – “he/she/they/it”

Switching the voice of the narrator mid-story is like asking, “Do you walk to school or bring a lunch?”

Who is telling this story? From what Point of View (POV) is the story being told?

The Narrator of any story has a particular Point of View (POV)

Usually for a screenplay the screenwriter’s view is omniscient.

However, if the story is being told from the POV of one of the characters then it can’t be omniscient because one character cannot be everywhere, cannot be inside the heads of the other characters – right? Therefore, if the story is told from a 1st person POV, then the narrator is *limited*. In Chinatown Jake Gittes’ POV is extremely limited. But he is sympathetic so we – the audience – follow him along even though he is always WRONG (and being wrong is usually quite unsympathetic).

The Setting

Where does the story take place?

When does it take place?

Past

Present

Future

Endings

Tragedy – one or more of the protagonists die from tragic flaws

Comedy – he, she or they overcome their flaws and drive into the sunset

Bittersweet/Tragi-comedy/Dramedy – mixed ending, mixed emotions

Pyrrhic – win the battle but lose the war

Genres

Historical – “Period pieces”

Romance

Romantic comedy

Drama

Fiction

Fact – documentary

Walter Cronkite used to end his newcasts with the phrase,
“That’s the way it was... January 1st, 1954”

Melodrama

Action

War

Buddy

Satire

Farce – more crude than satire, audience feels superior to the characters

Horror

“Other?” _____

Movie posters often reveal the endings – comedy or tragedy

Film is a visual medium

Screenwriters must abide by the adage, “**Show, don’t tell.**”

Explication is frowned upon

Is that true for stories? Paintings? Songs? Cartoons?

What’s the main ingredient of a story’s plot? The basis of universally appealing stories is **conflict**, watching the protagonist overcome external and internal obstacles and conflicts.

Try to think of a story that you’ve read, seen or heard that was interesting or enthralling that didn’t have a conflict, didn’t have something internal or external obstacle that the protagonist had to overcome....

Characters

Protagonist

Sympathetic – the audience must be able to relate and sympathize/empathize with the protagonist (Sympathy here doesn't mean that you feel sorry for the protagonist; it means that you relate to him or her in some way)

Antagonist

“Evil” or terribly misguided in some way

Main themes and conflicts of a Protagonist

Man vs. man

Man vs. himself – an internal struggle

Man vs. society – a moral struggle

Man vs. nature – struggle against fate

What is at stake? What will be the consequences if the protagonist fails?

You must ask this question on every page: “Does the audience know what is at stake?”

What is at stake? Is it the same or different as what was at stake ten pages ago?

How does the audience know what is at stake? *Are you sure?*

How does the protagonist's fatal flaw or Achilles's heel create tension?

The protagonist is always sympathetic. The audience instinctively is hoping for him/her to succeed even when it looks like the situation is completely hopeless. If anything in the protagonist's backstory or story hinders the sympathy, then the audience will not be able to partake in the joy when the hero overcomes the villain.

Most Hollywood films clearly define the protagonist and the antagonist within the first 10 pages. Jody Foster in her directorial debut “Little Man Tate” went so far as to dress the bad teacher in black while the good tutor was dressed in white. Audiences don't want to have to guess who to cheer for in the movie. Also, the protagonist is usually introduced before the antagonist - like in professional wrestling and fighting.

Inciting or activating incident

Page ten of screenplays – **“Why is this day different from any other?”**

First ten pages must inform audience of the protagonist(s)' life up until that point.

Plot

Beginning
Middle
End

Or...

The Hollywood 3 Act Structure
A. The Set-up
B. The Confrontation
C. The Resolution

Or...

Act 1 – take your protagonist and put her up a tree
Act 2 – throw rocks at her
Act 3 – just when it looks like she has found a way down she looks down and sees something unexpected like her mother or best friend standing at the base of the tree with a chainsaw. Then she is forced to look into her own soul, find a universal truth, and find the “true” way out of her predicament.

When you work with one eye on your script and the other on Hollywood, making eccentric choices to avoid the taint of commercialism, you produce the literary equivalent of a temper tantrum. Like a child living in the shadow of a powerful father, you break Hollywood’s “rules” because it makes you feel free. But angry contradiction to the patriarch is not creativity; it’s delinquency calling for attention. Difference for the sake of difference is as empty achievement as slavishly following the commercial imperative. Write only what you believe.

Robert McKee, “Story Structure”

Subplot(s) - interwoven

Suspense vs. Surprise

Alfred Hitchcock explained the difference between surprise and suspense: if a bomb under a table goes off, that's surprise. If we know the bomb is under the table but not when it will go off, that's suspense.

The MacGuffin... or just an unbelievable coincidence

Character Arc: what is the universal law learned by the protagonist? At what point does she have her 'a-ha' moment.

Denouement (not 100% necessary, particularly in films): How have the events since the inciting incident changed the protagonist and his world.

What constitutes a plot twist? What is a "hook?"

What constitutes a scene?

A scene is analogous to a postcard or song: it should say something but leave the audience wanting more or leave them with a question. Get it?
How is tension created?

I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?

Hamlet

promontory | 'prämən, tōrē| | , prämən 'tɔri| | , prɒm(ə)nt(ə)ri|
noun (pl. **-ries**)

a point of high land that juts out into a large body of water; a headland :

firmament | 'fərməmənt| | , fərməmənt| | , fə:məm(ə)nt|
noun poetic/literary

the heavens or the sky, esp. when regarded as a tangible thing.

Originality – writer must walk the razor's edge between originality and absurdity, between believability and unbelievability, between flawed and pathetic characters. The story must be **“UNIQUELY FAMILIAR.”**

Diction – (word choice) don't use two words when you can use one. Always be as precise as possible. Don't guess at what words mean. Don't use words simply because you like the way they sound. Precision and concision are the keys to a great screenplay. Think "**LESS IS MORE.**"

The best way to learn how to be great is to read great writers.

Creative Writers Story Checklist

- What is the setting (place and time)?
- Who is the protagonist or who are the protagonists?
- Who or what are the antagonists?
- What is the protagonist's inner struggle (fatal flaw)?
- What is the protagonist's outer struggle, obstacle, conflict?
- What stands in the way of her overcoming all of the struggles and conflicts?
- What is at stake if she fails to overcome these struggles and conflicts?
- What does she learn in the process or on her journey?

Writer/Directors vs. Writers

Choosing your readers: are you writing for development execs, investors, actors, producers, independent producers, television, cable, Europeans, a director... yourself?

Choosing your audience: Male/Female, Black/White, Children, Teenagers - how will each demographic group relate to your story?

Choosing the genre: Event/Tentpole, Drama, Action Adventure, Suspense-thriller, Romance, Comedy, Crime/Detective Mystery, Road Movie, Film noir, etc.

Logistics: Form, Format, Software, Text, Dialogue, Parentheticals

Terms: Above the line, below the line, P&A

Budgets: Studio films, Independent/European financed films, low budget, no budget

The statistics: 120 Studio films per year; half from books, some from internally developed ideas, the rest from screenplays bought from writers. Otherwise, there were over 4000 feature length independent films submitted to Sundance last year only and only 6 or 7 were domestically distributed.

Syd Field in "Screenplay" discusses characters being active rather than passive. Passive is when actions happen to the protagonist; active is when the protagonist causes things to happen. "Three Days of the Condor" is a masterpiece because there are two switches from passive to active. First, Redford after having everything happen to him (all of his co-workers and his girlfriend are killed), becomes active and decides to hunt down the killers instead of be hunted. Secondly, Faye Dunaway who is kidnaped when RR becomes active and remains passive (tied up) during the second act, decides inexplicably to risk her life and help RR. She becomes active; that's the second plot twist - and then they kidnap Cliff Robertson together.

The Big Reveal: the reveal is a huge concept in Hollywood. For instance, in "The Crying Game" the big reveal is that the woman is not a woman. In "Chinatown" it's that the missing girl is not really Hollis' girlfriend but the daughter (and granddaughter) of Noah Cross.

Character Driven stories vs. intricate narratives
Studio films vs. Independent films
American films vs. European films

Developing deep meaningful characters vs. earpieces to give the audience information

Writing a 1-2 page Synopsis

First decide the ending – does the protagonist succeed or fail? In what way or ways do he or she succeed or fail? More importantly, what did he or she LEARN on their journey?

Then decide the beginning/point of departure, the inciting incident (*Why is this day different from any other?*) What information must the audience know about the character before the inciting incident? What backstory is necessary? Writing the protagonist's biography. Is the story and/or character compelling, emotionally engaging? Why?

Registering your material with the WGAw
Online – very very easy

Expanding your Synopsis into an 8-10 page Treatment

Do each of the three acts stand alone and remain interesting?

Do the protagonist's situation and problem seem organic or contrived?

The easy parts: Act 1 and Act 3. The hard part: Act 2.

Act 2 is always the writer's worst nightmare – any development executive who doesn't like a script can always say, "Well, the second act was weak..." and he will usually be right. It's extremely difficult to keep the tension up during the second act.

Expanding your Treatment into a 60-90 Scene Breakdown

Who is in each scene?

What action occurs? Where does it take place?

What information is conveyed to the audience?

Every scene must deepen understanding of character or advance the narrative (hopefully both). If executives hit a scene that they don't understand because it doesn't directly further the story, they put the screenplay down. If you're spending ten million dollars on a film you don't want your audience guessing. Joe Sixpack doesn't spend \$8 to guess about a character's motivations. Studio executives know that he must interest Monsieur Sixpack sufficiently in the first ten minutes to make him sit there for the next 90 minutes. There must be something that happens - visually - not just a beautiful person or place but an event such as a murder or kidnapping. Otherwise he is going to be confused; he's not so smart and he keeps asking himself, "Why am I watching this?" Sometimes he even says, "Life is too short... too short to be bothered trying to figure out why characters on celluloid are acting bizarrely." If the pacing slows down because of confusing, ambiguous, or seemingly unnecessary scenes then the audience is going to go to sleep or be upset. You don't want either.

Expanding your Scene Breakdown into a Screenplay

Add dialogue

Start every scene as late as possible and get out of it as early as possible

Think of every scene as a postcard or song, complete unto itself

Suggested Reading List:

Screenplay by Syd Field

The Writer's Journey by Christopher Vogler

Structure by Robert McKee

Write it, Sell it by Linda Palmer

Suggested Viewing List:

"A Simple Plan" by Sam Raimi – the perfect screenplay

"Three Days of the Condor" by Sydney Pollock - *for active/passive distinction, 3-Act Structure*

"The Lords of Discipline" - *for set-up, structure, and mentor*

"Chinatown" by John Huston - *for protagonist's perspective*

"City of Hope" by John Sayles - *for multi-dimensional structure, structural intricacy, real characters, real situations*

"Withnail and I" by Bruce Robinson - *for language, subtext, a "mini-plot"*

SCREENPLAY FORM AND STYLE - SCREENWRITING ESSENTIALS

FADE IN:

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

EXT. CLASSROOM - NIGHT

The above is called the "Slug Line". The primary information contained in the slug line is for the Assistant Director (AD) who is going to schedule the production. He or she needs to know whether the location is an Interior or an Exterior and whether it takes place during the Day or during the Night. Exteriors are most often shot "on location", whereas Interiors can be shot either "on location" or on a constructed set. This is what the AD needs to know to schedule the production. Thus, there are only two choices for the first and third part of the slug line.

JOHN (30) enters the crowded classroom. He's charming, well-dressed, well-groomed - all slightly overdone. He's a real ladykiller, or would like to be.

This is the "Text". It tells a little about the atmosphere and gives very specific information about the people. (Unless, of course, a place is or becomes a character - more on that later.) Here it is important to state why this character stands out from the other characters and from average people. The first time you introduce a character - and only the first time - his or her name must be capitalized. After that only capitalize the first letter.

Most importantly, TEXT IS RESTRICTED TO VISUAL INFORMATION. Thus, do not write "Sally thinks or remembers that John is a geek." You can't see what someone is "thinking" unless you're psychic - it's not visual.

Finally, text should be precise and not flowery and always written in the present tense active voice. The passive voice should never be used - never use the passive voice. Also, avoid gerunds: John stands or John walks rather than John is standing or John is walking.

JOHN

Hey, did you guys see the fight
outside?

This is the "Dialogue". The dialogue is crucial to advancing the plot, giving the backstory, developing the characters, pacing the scenes and the acts. There is no such thing as meaningless dialogue. Every phrase must work to further the story, the character, or both. Important: only use a few exclamation points per screenplay and only use them at crucial point. Never write, "Hello!"

BETSY (V.O.)

Shut up and sit down.

Actors and most readers loathe parentheticals. They must be used sparingly and only to avoid potential confusion. If you write (sarcastically) next to the name and the dialogue is obviously sarcastic, then the reader will think that you're condescending. Only use them when there is the potential for the reader to make a mistake and you can't find another way to clarify the matter. Also, never put action descriptions in parentheses such as (smacking him), keep that for text.

FLASHBACK

Flashbacks, in general, mean that the writer couldn't find an adequate way to recount the story or develop the character in a straightforward manner. They are an escape to proper storytelling wherein the backstory is provided in the story. Flashbacks signify a weakness in the writer. Pray you avoid them.

MONTAGE

- A. The American flag flying
- B. Army SOLDIERS scampering from incoming bombs
- C. A field of screaming bloody Soldiers

Montages can be used to provide an array of images without dialogue. Just don't use more than a few in a screenplay.

CAMERA ANGLES AND MOVES - PANNING - TRACKING - DOLLIES

Nobody likes a writer providing camera angles or moves. Only provide camera angles and moves if 1. You're the director and 2. The camera angle or move is so important that it changes the way we perceive the story or character.

CLOSE/CLOSE ON/CLOSE UP

Ditto for CLOSE UPS. They are a directors decision unless it is something incredibly obvious such as the audience knowing who the murderer is and the camera closing in on him or her at a pivotal moment.

INSERT

JACK'S POV: A dog pissing on his bike.

INSERT and POV (point of view) should be used sparingly, only when they're essential to the story.

CUT TO:

DISSOLVE TO:

SMASH CUT TO:

Don't bother with these transitions - including 'continued'. They take up space and really don't mean anything. The only one that means anything is DISSOLVE, but it is difficult to use properly.

FADE OUT

Unless FADE OUT is at the end of the screenplay signifying the end of the film, it is always followed by FADE IN.