SCRIPTWRITING

by

SAMUEL SLOVES

Adjunct Associate Professor of Media Arts and Technology
Borough of Manhattan Community College

Supervising Editor
M. George Stevenson

Associate Professor of Media Arts and Technology
Borough of Manhattan Community College

Reviewing Editor
Agustin McCarthy

Assistant Professor of Media Arts and Technology
Borough of Manhattan Community College

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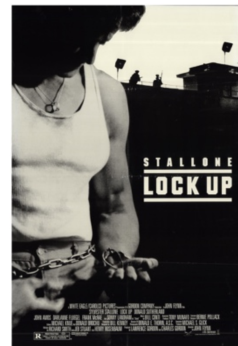
INTRODUCTION

Welcome!

The goal of this text is to give you the tools to develop and write a short script with a deliberate dramatic structure and reflecting industry standard formatting.

Embedded in this process will be the development of an idea, building an engaging story, and crafting a plot. Along the way you will create a treatment, synopsis, outline, logline, and pitch for two roughly 7- to 15-page screenplays: one based on a fiction idea and the other a documentary-style film based on nonfiction sources.

This may appear daunting but it is possible. There was a story that made the rounds at film schools about a student who spent his semester playing pool rather than writing. The weekend before his completed feature script was due, he locked himself in his room with a case of Red Bull™ and completed a 100+ page script in 72 hours. That script was bought and made into the film *Lock Up*.



We will revisit this script later for an important follow up, but the point here is that it is well within reach to accomplish the above, even without Red Bull™.

Yeah, but I don't want to be a screenwriter, boomer.

Well, effective storytelling is an essential skill in the business world. But don't take my word for it, I'm just some schmuck you called "dude," check out this article from the *Harvard Business Review* that stresses the importance of storytelling in business.

Whether your thing is entrepreneurship, nursing, marketing—you name it—effective storytelling can help. In fact, if you are going to continue on with this, consider this required reading!

The Irresistible Power of Storytelling as a Strategic Business Tool

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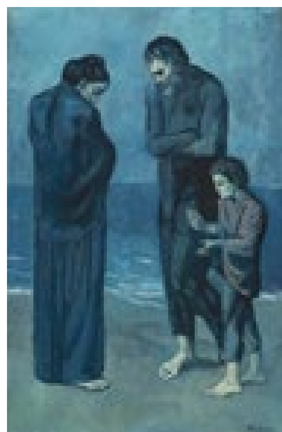
Perhaps you reject the bourgeois notions of traditional narrative. You take a long pull on a Gauloise, adjust your beret, and think,

"I reject your conventional narrative and the work it does perpetuating a moribund society rife with…."

And you might be absolutely right. And you should pursue that passion. But think of this as your "Blue Period."

What do I mean? The painter Pablo Picasso famously painted in a groundbreaking manner in several abstract styles, including, most famously, Cubism. His masterpiece is arguably, *Guernica* (1939):

Prior to that, however, he went through what is known as his Blue Period where his paintings were more traditional figurative paintings, such as *The Tragedy* (1903):



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Picasso proved he understood and could successfully work within the conventions of the day, and *then* he rejected them.

Or perhaps you can think of this as your time behind enemy lines. Pursue your passion, by all means. But for the purposes of what we are setting out to accomplish here, understand those conventions that you plan to reinvent or reject.

There will be some discussion of the feature screenplay, but the focus here will be on the narrative short film. The short will teach you much of the thinking and process that goes into a feature.

WHAT IS A SCREENPLAY?

So, what is a screenplay? It is a written basis for a film. The screenwriter Robert Towne who wrote *Shampoo* (1975, directed by Hal Ashby) described writing a screenplay thus:

Writing a screenplay is recounting a film that has already been made in your mind.

A screenplay sits in a fairly unique place in the arts: It is a work that is created in words but results in images. It is a **transitional document** in this regard. Even its cousin, the play, is returned to each time the play is produced or even performed, but the script—once shot ("in the can" as they say)—and that is it—is rarely revisited.

Hence, screenplays focus on what we **see** and **hear**. The sound bite version of this is:

SHOW DON'T TELL

Notice in this scene from Tangerine (2015, directed by Sean Baker and written by Baker and Chris Bergoch), a feature film shot entirely on an iPhone 5, that you know so much about the characters from what they do and how they react to each other you don't even need the sound. In fact, try watching this scene without sound (NOTE: This suggestion especially applies if you do not want to see a scene of anti-trans harassment). Even without hearing the dialogue, you can feel what is at stake for the characters and how their relationship shifts from the beginning to end of the clip.

Tangerine (2015) - The Piss Cup Scene (8/8) | Movieclips

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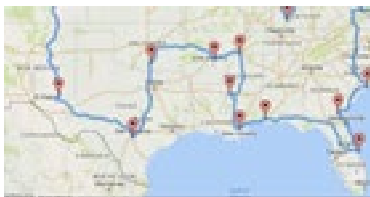
While a short story or a novel might explain or embellish with a cauldron of interior emotions and thoughts, a screenplay is designed to evoke a film (the film that has already been shot in your own mind).

Even so, don't worry if you don't get it right or get stuck, the other animating sound bite is **WRITING IS REWRITING**. Do you best and revisit.

There are several popular analogies for this notion of a **transitional document**.

- Blueprint
- Roadmap
- Sales prospectus

A blueprint in so far as it is a plan explaining to how the film will tell the story. The way a blueprint is a plan for a building.



A roadmap as it is a guide of how the film will go from one place to another without actually taking you there.

A sales prospectus as it is a proposal of sorts as to how a film will be fashioned and made. Your plan for the various steps from beginning to end.

Implicit in each of these analogies is a certain amount of collaboration. The transition from idea to film—the linchpin of which is the screenplay—requires collaboration. And one should develop good habits early. Thus, as we dig into the process of writing a screenplay, we will be working together, giving one another feedback.

As we work through the process, we will come across a certain amount of jargon common to screenwriters. While this jargon sometimes allows for a clarity and specificity that other words might not, it can also be a bit gratuitous. And yet, we will use it, as it is the common language of the industry and will allow you to communicate with co-workers and peers going forward.

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STORY BASICS

Story at its most basic, according to the dictionary, is an account of interesting events—either actual occurrences or fiction/ fictionalized events. This accounting usually has:

> **A Beginning –** This sets up the world of the story (the ***status quo***) and introduces a problem that challenges the status quo that cannot be ignored.
>
> **A Middle** – This shows the steps taken in response to the challenge to the original status quo.
>
> **An End** – This shows how the steps taken are resolved into a new status quo.

The ending can be an **open ending** or a **closed ending**.

A **closed ending** definitively solves the problem as stated at the beginning of the film.

As Eddie Murphy summarizes an Elvis movie, “Elvis has to win that race.”

Eddie Murphy - Elvis Presley - Delirious Live (Warning: Eddie Murphy curses. A lot.):

So by the end of the film, he either wins or loses and we walk out of the theater or more likely get up to go to the kitchen and hum the closing lines of *Viva Las Vegas* (and if we are really cool we hum this version by The Dead Kennedys.)

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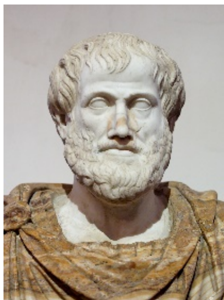
Other films have an **open ending**, that may not definitely resolve the film.

Many of you might be familiar with the famously open ending created by Christopher Nolan for *Inception*, or the notorious fail of an open ending from *The Sopranos*.

The final scene of the Sopranos

The Sopranos was so unsatisfying to so many viewers that series creator David Chase eventually had to 'explain' it: Tony died.

A fictional story might germinate from an incident or a moment, but shaping it into a story is the work of a screenwriter (for non-fiction/documentary stories much of the below applies, but for specifics go to).



Back in the day, old school Aristotle—not to be confused with the big Aristotle (Shaq)—wrote the *Poetics*. In this he writes about tragedy where he goes into great detail, breaking down narrative tighter than Run DMC on *Sucker MCs*.

While Aristotle wrote millennia ago, there are certain elements to his *Poetics* which are a bit dated (an essential characteristic is "manliness" yikes!), but the basics still animate writing to this day. He defends the notion of story as an imitative art deeply rooted in human nature that allows for entertainment and learning.

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Aristotle lists six principles of what he calls tragedy, but which we think of as the more general concept of "drama."

- ***Plot*** – The plot at its most basic: a beginning, a middle, and an end.
- ***Character*** – Consistent in actions in so far as the character behaves true to the nature that the writer has created.
- ***Thought* (Theme)** – The connection to a greater meaning to the explicit actions.
- ***Diction* (Dialog)** – What and how characters speak.
- ***Song* (Music)** – A somewhat specific reference to the Greek chorus, a group of chanting dancers who served many functions, but, broadly interpreted, speaks to the power that music can have on drama.
- ***Spectacle*** – The visual elements of the presentation of the story.

Aristotle writes on other notions regarding an effective story which we will dig into as we consider the specifics of narrative and plot including **unity, surprise, reversal, recognition, suffering, frailty, universality**, and **causality**.

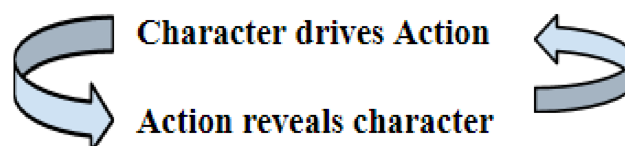
And as these come together, they should create what Aristotle calls "**pity and fear"** what today we usually call **"empathy"** or **"identification with the character"** which culminates in a **catharsis**.

While his particular meaning of **catharsis** has been debated throughout history, for our purposes let's say that the goal should be that the audience should care about the characters and will hence have an emotional reaction to the resolution.

Aristotle focuses on tragedy and epic poetry and makes promises about later discussing comedy that are lost to history (no doubt after a night of debauchery), and yet much of what he observes rings true for stories throughout the ages and in different cultures. There are different narrative forms throughout the world in different eras, the Kishōtenketsu (a Japanese theory of storytelling) among many, and yet the notion of story in some fashion persists.

Hence, Aristotle is a good place to start. His first two elements, **plot** and **character**, are intimately intertwined: Character drives plot while plot reveals character.

This is the magical engine that drives a story. Through the plot we learn more about the characters, and the characters commit actions which drive the plot and reveal their character which….



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I like to think of this as the screenwriter's *möbius*—different yet essentially related and dependent on one another to create the whole.

Central to this notion of story and character is **conflict**. It is hard to imagine a world with no conflict and, therefore, stories have conflict.

Conflict can take many forms. One can read on the internets about a style of storytelling that is conflict free. And then the story will begin with, "the character was feeling a lot of turmoil." Or "the husband wrote in his diary of his frustration that his wife no longer desired him."

Well, those are both examples of conflict. We can break conflict into some basic categories:

- Character vs Character
- Character vs Society
- Character vs Nature
- Character vs Self
- Character vs Gods (Fate)

A story does not have to stick to just one. And scenes that may seem to be conflict or drama free, often have small units of conflict that drive the story forward.

A concept that often can create conflict amongst storytellers is the notion of thought or theme. Frank Capra—who made the classic *It's a Wonderful Life*—famously said, "If you want to send a message, use Western Union." (If he were alive today, that would read, "Send a text.")

On the other hand, others argue that fiction is a way to express a take on reality.

There is no right or wrong here. All stories expose something important about the human condition—that's what makes them interesting. However, if a writer gets too obsessed with the message, they can lose the forest for the trees. If what's spurring you to write is a burning desire to say, for example, it's bad when people are mean to each other, but you don't demonstrate any examples of how being mean can affect a character, you don't have a story, you have a slogan. It is a balance that each writer must negotiate for themselves. If you can't articulate why your story is interesting, perhaps it is not worth devoting a large amount of time to it. On the other hand, if the message is crystal clear but it is not holding people's interest, perhaps you need to tip the balance the other way.

I'm not a neuroscientist, but I will occasionally mention the accepted neuroscience behind the human connection to story. Science, as we know, evolves. My mom was at a dinner sponsored by her workplace, the LA County Museum of Natural History, where the guest of honor was a famous paleo-anthropologist who claimed that *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthals did not interbreed.

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My mom looked at him and said, “Have you met *Homo sapiens*—men? They’ll f*ck anything. They f*ck sheep, goats, you name it. They certainly would have a f*cked a Neanderthal.”

Well, in the time since, science evolved: Genomic sequencing gave rise to data that Humans and Neanderthals did, in fact, interbreed. So, since science evolves, the references here are to current thinking in neuroscience and are subject to revision.

One area of science of interest to artists are studies of how observers react: Different neurons fire in different parts of the brain while we watch a film and, one of the lessons from current neuroscience is that a set of neurons fire as if we, the viewer, were *actually* performing the action we are watching. This involves a set of neurons call mirror neurons.

So when a story teller builds a story about a protagonist who pursues a goal, overcoming obstacles as related through dialogue, music, and the visuals, and we gain some insight—small or large – on the human condition through experiencing it. Stories become a way to try out behaviors and actions without the actual consequences.

Part of this is the chemical reactions in the brain to **cortisol** (**awareness**) **oxytocin** (**empathy**) and **dopamine** (**reward**). Dopamine functions in a particularly interesting way. We as humans try to notice and decode patterns. As we do, we get a release of dopamine which fires our pleasure centers in our brain. We are literally wired to figure things out. However, that dopamine shot diminishes if a figuring out process is repeated.

However, we are also wired to get a bit of dopamine after a surprise. So we get a reward when a story allows us to figure out some things and also when it surprises us, but, at its best, the surprises also make sense in retrospect.

As these events unfold, we also create oxytocin which experts have helpfully termed the empathy drug (although drug is apt metaphor as it is the same chemical associated with xenophobia). A story that creates empathy (oxytocin) puts us in a position of not watching but experiencing (mirror neurons), and then rewards us as we figure out the patterns of the story and react to surprises which at some point make sense. If a story is too obvious, the dopamine system shuts down. As the article also explains, if it is simply surprise with no meaning, it will also not effectively produce dopamine.

A clever scientist has termed this the “Aha! Moment.” And we all have expressed both sides of this coin: The overly predictable—a totally unoriginal romantic comedy where they like each other but predictable obstacles slow their inevitable reunion. (One such predictable romcom made my dad famously mutter, “Will they hurry up and f*ck already so I can get home in time to watch Seinfeld.”)

Or, on the flip side, have you watched a movie and realized you have no idea what is going on or why people are doing what they’re doing?

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DiMovClip

In both cases you get bored.

Scientists postulate that early cavepeople thrived with this chemical reaction. A cavedweller comes back from a hunting expedition with a horrifying story of almost getting eaten by a bear.

As the dweller tells the story, mirror neurons fire in his clan, as the story get tense, they release cortisol. As the story progresses, dopamine fires (with both surprises and perhaps an aha moment) in the other cavepeople, and this chemical combination burns this story into their memory such that they have access to this knowledge the next time they go out to hunt, squat in the bushes, forage for berries etc. Further, our memory interacts with emotions such that emotions solidify or make more indelible our memories.

Emotion is sometimes disparaged in drama, and yet it is an essential building block. Some accuse certain films of being manipulative—asking for an emotional response, as in "It was a tearjerker." And yet, from Aristotle to neuroscience, we learn the importance of emotion. However, when someone says that a story is manipulative, they are usually arguing that the story has been crafted poorly—that it is *ineffectively* creating emotion.

Current science backs up many of Aristotle's ideas on story.

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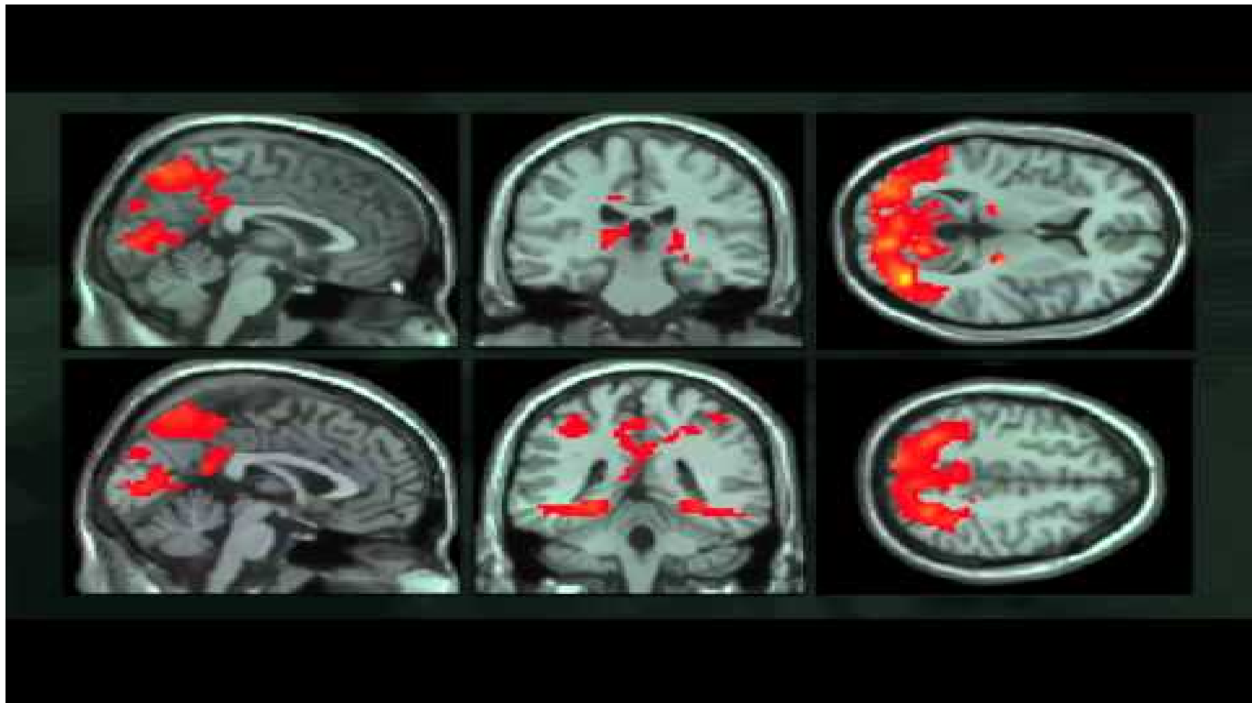
[Future of StoryTelling: Paul Zak]



As we shall see there are gradations here. This is a **form** rather than a **formula**. The emphasis can be an episodic examination of the protagonist(s), or be a tightly woven narrative where each scene builds on the next. There are infinite possibilities about how and what to relate.

Some people argue for a very formulaic approach to story such as Blake Snyder in his *Save the Cat* books (the name derived from the all-important obligatory scene of the protagonist doing something to elicit empathy) to the more open-ended approach of Robert McKee in *Story* (1997). We will focus on the basics of form here and leave the formulas for you to experiment with.

The neuroscience of storytelling was explored further by Daniel Kahneman who wrote *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. He argues that we tend to avoid cognitive stress. By this he means we prefer not to have to actively think too much if we can figure things out in a more natural form. In other words, make it tricky but not so tricky that you lose the audience. He also argues that we prefer consistency to completeness. We don't need to know everything about a character, but we expect those characters to act within the confines of what the story has established.

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At its core, a story has a **Beginning**, a **Middle** and an **End**.

It has **Characters** (who may or may not be human) who do things that reveal their individual personalities.

These **Actions** drive the **Plot.**

There are expectations that the Characters are part of a **World** or **Reality** in which **Cause** and **Effect** have a consistent relationship.

There will be **Conflict** that creates tension for the Characters and leads to some sort of **Resolution** (whether definitive or more open to interpretation).

ELEMENTS OF 3-ACT STORY STRUCTURE

A Summary of Theses and Terminology

I. <u>BEGINNING aka SET UP aka A PROBLEM IS IDENTIFIED</u>

A. Exposition shows the **status quo** or **given circumstances**, i.e., the world in which the Protagonist lives and identifies an **underlying need** felt by the Protagonist.

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Example: Dorothy leads a hard, unfulfilling life on a Kansas farm where the only being that seems to appreciate her is her dog, Toto.

B. An **inciting incident/catalyst** of plot, which focuses the Protagonist and reveals the theme; exposition ends and the **purposeful actions** of protagonist begin.

Example: Miss Gulch presents a legal document forcing Dorothy to turn over Toto to her, but Toto escapes and runs to Dorothy.

C. Protagonist declares a goal, sets out to reach objective, leading directly to the engagement of the conflict.

Example: To save Toto from being killed, Dorothy must run away from the farm. Dorothy's longing for a new life is now not an option but a necessity. Running away results in Dorothy being in the house when tornado hits, it takes her to Oz.

II. MIDDLE aka CONFLICT aka A SOLUTION IS PROPOSED

A. Escalating action as the **stakes** are raised for the Protagonist, usually through opposition by the Antagonist.

Example: Dorothy's house kills the Wicked Witch of the East, but Dorothy receives the Witch's ruby slippers, The Wicked Witch of the West vows revenge. To escape the Witch, Dorothy sets out to return to Kansas, which means she must get the help of the Wizard, who is in the Emerald City, a journey that has many obstacles.

B. A **crisis/point of no return** in which the main conflict either reverses direction or rises to a much higher level.

Example: Dorothy gets to see the Wizard, but he's a fraud.

C. The conflict reaches **resolution** when the Protagonist **succeeds or fails at reaching the objective.**

Example: The Wizard is so touched by Dorothy's perseverance and longing for home that he proposes to take her back in a balloon.

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III. <u>RESOLUTION aka END aka SOLUTION SUCCEEDS OR FAILS</u>

A. Acts as a coda to the main action; **fully realizes the Theme** by directing us back to the **Protagonist's underlying need** as revealed in the Set-Up.

Example: Glinda reveals that the ruby slippers will take Dorothy back to Kansas; once there, she finds that she was more valued than she realized.

<u>TERMS OF DRAMATIC ART</u>

The **Protagonist** is in search of a particular goal or objective and drives the actions of the plot.

Example: Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, who wants to go someplace outside her Kansas farm town to find an environment where she can be valued as a person and to save her only friend, Toto, from being destroyed.

The **Antagonist** is character or obstacle exerting equal and opposite force to obstruct the Protagonist from obtaining the stated objective.

Example: Miss Gulch/The Wicked Witch of the West

The **Theme** is made up of the reasons why the Protagonist's objective is important to both the Protagonist and the audience and how the Protagonist's search for a way to obtain his or her objective relates to the audience's need to resolve similar objectives.

Example: Dorothy thinks she needs to go over the rainbow to obtain Toto's safety and to be appreciated by those around her, but finds that everyone around her actually has the same goals as she.

These are the basics of story.

Next we will look at the complementary side of the Character/Plot *möbius* (character) before we get deeper into the details of story.

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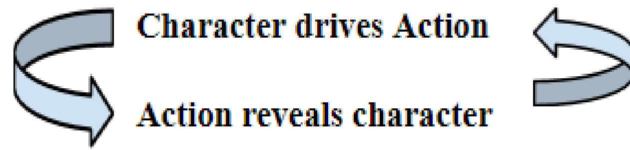

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GENERATING IDEAS

WHAT IS AN IDEA?

When we mean idea, we mean an idea for a story. A story has a **beginning**, **middle**, and **end**.

It is often helpful to generate a story idea by proposing an incident.

I broke my arm.

- This is an incident. But it is not a story.

I cried at a picture of my old pet.

- This an incident; it's an emotion, but it is not a story.

The magic is to find an incident and expand it into a story. Take a truth and turn it into an insight.

> I broke my arm one month before basketball tryouts. The doctor told me I had to wear a cast for six weeks.
>
> The coach told me there would only be one try out.
>
> After I unsuccessfully trying to cut off the cast, my mother got mad at me and refused to help me eat. I had to eat with my off hand.
>
> I got an idea. I spent every waking hour practicing dribbling and shooting with my off hand. I even had my sister read me math problems while I practiced.
>
> While I struggled a bit during the tryouts, I finished tryouts with the best free throw percentage of all participants. The coach made me the equipment manager until my cast came off.

Notice, Set up, complication, resolution.

Also notice: Everything is an observable action that takes place in real time.

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HOW DO WE GET/FIND/CREATE IDEAS?

There are many different ways to generate ideas for a story.

- Play "What if..."

  Example: What if I found out my little sister was an alien?

- Develop a character, and think about what happens to that character

  *Example***:** If my best friend were Sherlock Holmes, how would he deal with the school bully?

- Name a few things for which you are an expert, write ten facts about each thing

- Play the Fred Armisen game: take a look at a book cover or ad and create your own story about it.

Fred Judges a Book by Its Cover: The Summer Sail by Wendy Francis

- Think about tough choices from you or a family member's past. Follow the scenario of what would have happened if the *opposite* choice had been made.

- Pick an object and free write, listing every possible thing that that object could do/be used for and how.

  Example: Where you or I see a bowl, thriller writers see a weapon, etc.

- Go through your own life history or the history of your relatives and find a moment of conflict.

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Example: you announce to your pacifist parents that you're entering the military.

- Once you have done this, play what if...
- Make decisions. See what happens next. Keep going, Keep making decisions. Then go back and make different decisions. Keep thinking and playing until you have an idea.
- Dave Chappelle's "Keeping it Real" strategy:

When Keeping It Real Goes Wrong - Vernon Franklin - Chappelle's Show

Let this inspire you… take a moment and then keep making the wrong turn and see where you end up.

RESEARCH?

In general, you can write about anything, but if you are writing about a topic for which you don't have a lot of ready information, you are going to need to do some research. And research takes time. For the purposes of completing a short film screenplay in under two months, it is very inadvisable.

Save that script about Russian hackers and the CIA for a time in your life when you can devote the hours, weeks, months of research needed to make that world come alive. To reiterate, this is NOT to discourage you from pursuing this idea, only to suggest you pursue it once you have completed this course.

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The most efficient story generator is to take a deep dive into your own life and see where it takes you. Answer these questions and then create a story from the different sections…

Image: How to Create a Character Arc from No Film School, How to Create Captivating Character Arcs in Your Screenplay

Here are some ideas from some of the best scripts that I have read from this process:

- A high school student's struggle to honor his brother dying of cancer
- A young girl overcoming her fear of the neighborhood dog
- The hard lessons of puppy love
- Revenge on a class bully
- A veteran's struggle with PTSD and the support he gets from a stray dog

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- A teenager coming to terms with their sexuality in a repressive and homophobic culture

The keys to each of the above stories was that the writer had a personal connection to the premise and was able to infuse the script with an authenticity and depth even though they MADE UP large portions of the story. There was some small seed of reality that gave rise to the idea, and they then expanded it.

FINALLY: For the purposes of this class, avoid:

- Stories where it turns out "it was all a dream."

- An ending that depends on a twist that is categorically incompatible with the premise.

  Example: A student living in this era struggles with a bully and in the final scene a dinosaur appears and eats the bully.

- The protagonist has to face down more than a couple of antagonists/obstacles

  Example: The protagonist pranking back someone and having it backfire is a short film; The protagonist finding and taking out the head of a major crime organization who destroyed their family is a feature.

- A major character dies at the end. Unless this story delves deeply into ramifications of the death, death usually serves as simplistic way to end the story.

You can write those stories as your second screenplay after this process is complete.

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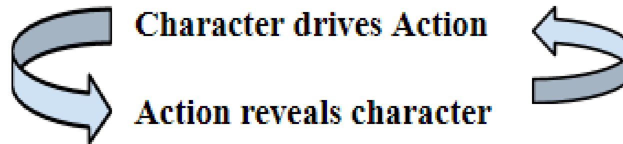
WRITING CHARACTERS

Presenting characters as distinct personalities builds an effective story. They engage your audience. They animate the screenwriter's *möbius.*



Try to picture a story without a character. Impossible, right?

Characters come in many guises; they can be:

- People of all shapes and sizes (dead or alive if it is a ghost story)
- Animals (*Finding Nemo, Family Guy, Lassie*)
- Things (*Her, 2001, Star Wars*)

They usually have feelings – although not always (Spock).

We usually identify with them -- or emphatically don't (Hannibal Lecter).

What unites them?

A capacity for thought—a capacity to solve a problem. Or perhaps simply that they are a character because they are treated like a character by others.

When creating a character consider their characteristics—external and internal, physical characteristics and personality characteristics.

Try to be specific and clear and avoid vacuous dating profile platitudes like "extroverted introvert."

When creating a character, be mindful of who that character is and how you want them to be seen. Consider which characteristics are important to your story. Some screenwriters like to be very specific about the race and/or ethnicity of a character while others only like to mention it in specific instances where they feel that information is important to their story. How you choose to approach this is up to you as a writer.

But it is important for you to consider this issue. Historically (a time that includes the present) many in the Hollywood industry (producers, directors, casting, agents, etc.) defaulted to seeing

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characters as white if no race was specified. Faced with this, some writers choose to designate a race for all characters. Others who want to invite the opportunity to consider many races or ethnicities have used NRS [No Race Specified] or other designation in the character description. While others (particularly filmmakers working outside the hegemony of Hollywood) worry that designating might backfire and limit the range of actors who may be considered for the role. The issue of race is crucial and it's up to you to deal with it in your writing as you think is most appropriate, but don't pretend it isn't there.

This also applies to other underrepresented identities. Human beings are exponentially diverse. Show this on screen.

Robert Townsend's film *Hollywood Shuffle* provides a funny yet poignant dramatization of this long history of racism within the film industry. Let this scene motivate you to create nuanced, diverse characters to help push back against the biases baked into our systems.

Hollywood Shuffle - Can you act more black?

For films, external actions illustrate these characteristics. Remember screenwriting hinges on what we see and hear, so characters are what they DO.

WHAT DOES A CHARACTER WANT?

A popular exercise is to list as many characteristics of a character as you can – you can try this as a thinking exercise or just give yourself a short time frame (one to two minutes) and write down as many as you can while continually writing (no pauses).
Think about your main character, what Aristotle would call your **protagonist**, which literally means "prime struggler":

What is their short-term goal?

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Their long term goal?

Their outlook on their life?

Their attitude towards others?

How do they see the world?

How does the world see them?

What is that deep aspiration – it may not be conscious – that they strive to fulfill?

As you consider these it might be worth considering Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs." Many of you may have come across this in high school: It is a pyramid of needs that Maslow argues represents the hierarchy of human needs.

Think about how your character addresses these needs and where their goals and drives fall within this hierarchy.

What problem is foremost in the character's priorities? What need defines who the character is? Is your character struggling to eat, feed clothe themselves? Do they have a safe place to live?

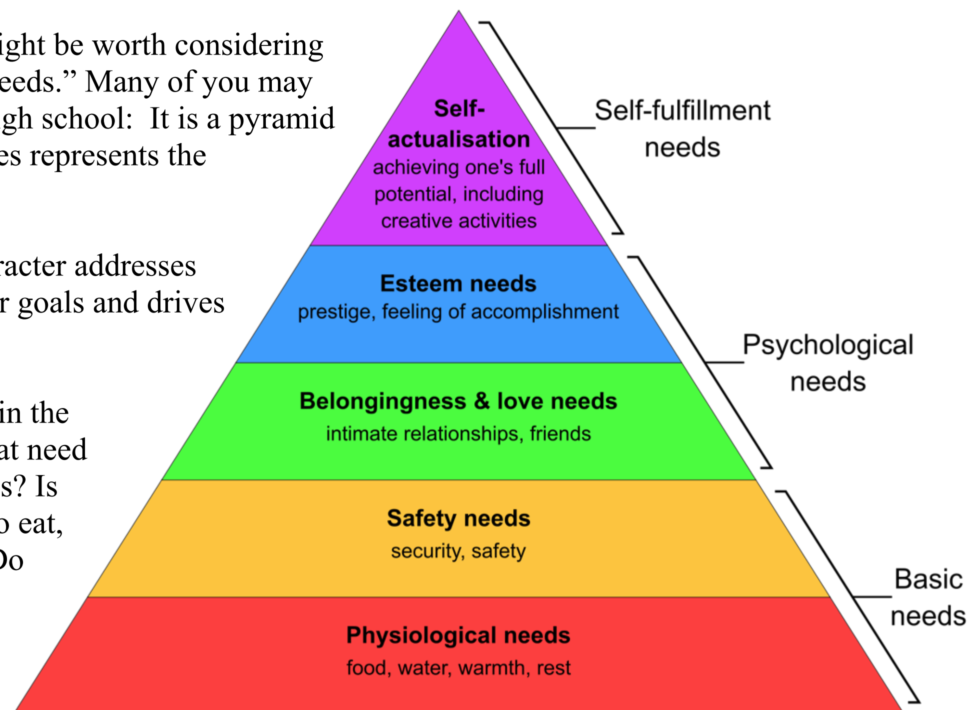

Image: "Maslow's hierarchy" by Androidmarsexpress is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

It can be helpful to place a character's need on the chart:

In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy needs "belongingness and love";

In *Star Wars: A New Hope*, Luke needs to use "self-actualization" to defeat the Empire;

In *Finding Nemo*, Marlin needs to provide "safety/security" for Nemo;

In *The Dark Knight*, The Joker needs to justify his self-esteem through power over others, etc.

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It is not that all of this information will explicitly make it into your screenplay, but as an effective storyteller you want your character to be believable within their narrative world. It doesn't need to be realistic to our world in our time, but the character must act in a way that makes sense for a character in that world. A character in *The Lord of the Rings* can pull a magic amulet out of their pocket, but we would not expect them to pull out an iPhone.

CREATING AN ARC

The deeper you understand the character the more effectively the engine of your screenwriting *möbius* will run. Your end goal is a script which will turn into a film. And that film will come to life through actors.

In doing their job, actors work to understand their roles. Actors dig into these characteristics; they investigate that inner need and ask questions about **how their character lives in the world**. They want to go back into that character's psyche and past and dig out that "need"— that thing that drives the character's actions (action = character/character = action). If *you* haven't thought about it, it will be more difficult for an actor to find it. And no character is too small. Consider the humble Tomato:

Tootsie- Sydney Pollack and Dustin Hoffman- George's office

Remember if a tomato doesn't have legs how can they sit down! It's funny and a bit over the top but it speaks to a larger truth. If you haven't thought through your characters, their actions might not make sense. They might not be consistent with the character and world you are showing.

You can think of a popular story paradigm:

> A character has a goal. The character will face obstacles and either succeed or fail in achieving that goal.

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For your main characters you must understand and be able to articulate their goals.

- ***Why*** is that their goal? (inner need – ask Maslow for help if you want: Why do they want to solve this problem among all the problems they face? Why is this the most important issue for the character? What are they willing to DO about it? What are the external (climbing Mt. Doom) and internal (I'm just a Hobbit!) obstacles?
- How do they go about achieving that goal (**attitude** and **outlook**)?
- What **obstacles** is the character creating for themself (habits, flaws, personality traits)?
- What changes must occur for them to achieve this goal (**arc**)?

How does a film audience gather this information? By what you SHOW them. You can't hand out a character bio to the audience, they must discover (consciously or not) these characteristics through what your character does/lives in the world. Telling an actor that their character is average height and has brown hair is not a helpful in terms of character.

Whereas writing that a middle-school girl is so tall so she hovers over the boys in her class or that a waiter at a upscale restaurant has a pink mohawk might help us understand the character more.

That is to say: Action reveals character.

We all have a common humanity – and yet we approach the world in many different ways. Who are your characters and what are the needs, desires, and history that motivate them?

So, ask each of your characters (even if they aren't on *CSI*):

The Who - Who Are You (Promo Video)

If you are looking to get a bit more granular, you can consider:

- Age

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- Gender and/or Gender Identity
- Race/Ethnicity
- Background
- Class
- Upbringing
- Identification
- Aspirations
- Speech
- Outlook (optimistic, etc.)
- Disposition (grumpy, gregarious, etc.)
- Conformity
- Confidence
- Reliability
- Appearance
- Fears
- Values
- Flaws
- Interests
- Desires
- Contradictions

The more you build the more you will learn. But much like the inner life of Dustin Hoffman's Tomato, much of this work will not end up explicitly in the screenplay. It will help you as you write in terms of discovering unexpected actions, thoughts and speech for your characters, it will prime the pump of characters driving actions.

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TYPES OF CHARACTERS

Who are the different characters in a screenplay? In most stories, there are certain types of characters:

Protagonist – colloquially the main character – literally *proto* (first) *agōnistēs* (competitor or struggler) notice the concept of struggle is in the very definition. Hence, when discussing narrative screenplays, we think of the protagonist as the character driving the action, the character with a goal with a primary struggle.

Antagonist – literally against struggle – usually characterized as the opponent — often but not always — the villain. The antagonist may simply have a different goal that does not allow the protagonist to reach their goal. They can sometimes be more of a catalyst (see below).

Catalyst character– motivates change – often the antagonist but not always, some argue that the antagonist is defined as the agent of change rather than the villain.

Love Interest – I'm hoping this is self-explanatory.

Confidant – Effective in externalizing the interior thoughts of characters, also allows for exposition

Foil – has some significant difference from another character usually the protagonist that highlights a particular quality

Deuteragonist – the second billing. The second most important character – a love interest, sidekick, or even villain.

Secondary character -- a blanket term for essential characters who interact with the protagonist.

Tertiary character – supporting or other minor characters who are mostly related to the story's setting rather than its specific conflicts (office colleagues, team members, etc.)

Stock characters – an easily recognizable character who is fairly one dimensional – the **nerd**, the **goof**, the **schoolmarm**, the **lust object**, etc.

You might also come across terms such as:

mentor character – someone who guides a character to a higher level.
*Example***:** Alfred in the Batman movies; the Fairy Godmother in *Cinderella* stories, etc.

sidekick – a faithful subordinate to another character—usually to the protagonist or antagonist.

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Example: Bill Murray to Dustin Hoffman in *Tootsie*, Harold Ramis to Bill Murray in *Stripes*, Jennifer Coolidge to Reese Witherspoon in *Legally Blonde,* Patrick Cranshaw to Jennifer Coolidge in *Best in Show*, etc.

symbolic figure/avatar (any major or minor character whose very existence represents some major idea or aspect of society).

Example: Neo is a Christ-figure in *The Matrix* films – as are Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings* films, Aslan in the Narnia books and films; and John Connor in *The Terminator* films. The Hulk is the Golem of the Marvel Universe; Don Corleone is the "logic of capitalism," etc.

In getting feedback, you may also hear characters called:

flat – similar to stock in that they serve a one-dimensional type or purpose.

round – complex, fully developed characters.

dynamic – one who undergoes a major change in worldview, attitude, outlook (tied to character arc).

static – a character often complex and interesting who does not change.

What might we say about these two characters and their interaction:

Prizi's Honor Scene

Do you see the *möbius* at work here?

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ADDING COMPLEXITY

The paradox of stories is that characters have to have their own identities while also serving set story roles. In building your character consider the following:

- Who?
- What is the problem?
- What their goal? What do they want?
- What do they need to do to achieve that goal?
- What is their flaw?
- What is their fear?
- Who is their opponent — how does the nemesis exploit that flaw/fear?
- What has the character learned?

How these characters function in your story leads us to an investigation into the details of your narrative.

Another set of exercises for developing a character:

- Give the character a **name**. A character should always have a name -- no one is born as "Hot Guy" or "Customer #3." Whatever it is, you should know it, even if it's never stated: In the Sergio Leone spaghetti Westerns that made him a major star, Clint Eastwood is remembered as "The Man With No Name." His characters are actually named "Joe," "Monaco," and "Blondie," but keeping those monikers to himself was part of his character.

  Examples: A macho man named Butch vs. a macho man named Percy. A beauty queen named Tiara vs. a beauty queen named Ethel. A nerd named Butch vs. a nerd named Michaelangelo, etc.

- Describe the character in **three words**.

  Examples: "Successful psychiatrist cannibal" (Hannibal Lecter, *Manhunter*/*The Silence of the Lambs* et al.), "Lonely Kansas dog-lover" (Dorothy Gale, *The Wizard of Oz*), "Relocated freewheeling detective" (Axel Foley, *Beverly Hills Cop I-III*), "Secret crime-fighting billionaire" (Bruce Wayne, *Batman/Batman Begins* et al.),

- Describe **how the character is viewed** by others.

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Examples: "Shy 30ish taxidermist who lives with his invalid mother" (Norman Bates, *Psycho* et al.), "Grieving mom overly anxious about her kids in need of a week at the beach" (Adelaide Wilson in *Us*), "Petty criminal wannabe who can be turned into an informant" (Verbal Kint in *The Usual Suspects*), etc.

- Describe the character's **main goal**.

  Examples: Survive the attack // Get through another day // Get love object to notice // Demonstrate ability // Find the solution // Save the world // Prove worthiness // Stop the disruptions // Win that race!!!!!!

- Describe the character's **plan** to achieve their goal.
- Describe **what's stopping the plan**.
- Describe **why the obstacle(s) seems insurmountable**.
- Describe **what happens if plan fails**.
- Describe **how success/failure will feel**.
- Describe **how is this important to the protagonist**'s life.

Once you have these outlines, you can move on to the next phase, and **develop your narrative**.

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DEVELOP NARRATIVE

Narrative is our pivot point. As a noun, it means

something that is narrated **:** STORY, ACCOUNT

As an adjective it means

Of, or relating to, the process of telling a story

which is to say, how the story is told. You can think of a story as having many elements.

The **form** refers to **how you tell the story**, **what you tell** and **the order you tell it**.

The **content** is the specifics of the narrative's events: **who it's about** and **what happens**.

CREATING A STRUCTURE

Now that we have gone through the basics, let's dig a bit deeper and get more specific.

Think of narrative as a way of **distributing information**—is it:

subjective - exclusively dominated by (and limited to) the point of view of a character?

objective - not taking someone's specific view but also not revealing all?

or

omniscient - able to see all and know all regardless of who is in any given scene?

Almost all good narratives follow the basic contours of a **story structure**: a beginning, a middle and an end.

At its most basic, this boils down to **setup**, **complications** and **resolution**. (You may also see this framed as: **setup**, **rising action**, and **resolution**.) We call this the **three-act structure**.

There are variations with more detail and nuance that work with a **four-act** or a **five-act structure**, episodic television traditionally uses a **seven-act structure** (must have cliffhangers so people come back from the commercials!), and there's even a variation that breaks stories into **eight "sequences"** (not the same as what we're going to call a "sequence"). There are well-known writers, directors and producers who swear by each idea. But they are all pivoting off the most basic three-act structure—**beginning, middle**, and **end**.

We all have our predilections. Some *love* the notion of a structure while others bristle at the idea that there is some rigid "formula."

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It's best to think of it as a **form** in the way that Aristotle's teacher Plato did: There is the **idea** or **ideal** of a pitcher or a vase and then there is the one that exists in the world.

You can fill a real-world vase or pitcher with as little or you much as it will hold. Furthermore, you can fill it up with anything – water, orange juice, mojitos, motor oil, mud, pebbles. The only limitation is the capacity of the vessel.

As an example:

> I broke my arm riding my bike.

Well so what… that is an item, a fact, it is not a story.

> I broke my arm and thought I should go get it fixed. My mom told me to take a warm bath and go to bed.

This adds a little complication or rising action.

> The next morning, I was still wailing about my arm. My mom agreed to take me to the doctor, if I promised to shut-up after the visit.
>
> The doctor x-rayed my arm and put it immediately in a cast.*

*As long as my mom still had a memory, I reminded her of that.

It might not be an engaging story, or even a very good one, but it has a beginning, a middle and an end.

From the days of Aristotle until the present time, there are certain elements that we find in common in a well-told story.

There is an ordered world (**status quo**) in which there is a **protagonist** who has or takes on a **goal.**

The protagonist encounters **obstacles** on the way to reaching this goal, sometimes moving forward, sometimes suffering a setback.

The protagonist's confrontation of the obstacles reaches a **climax**, when the protagonist either **succeeds or fails** and then a **new order** or status quo is established.

The protagonist will be changed by this process (have a **character arc**).

There is the first act — the **setup** — which contains an **inciting incident** (which I may refer to as $\mathbf{I^2}$ out of sheer laziness). This is the event that kicks the story into motion. Without this moment, the story would not proceed.

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The Script Notes podcast, run by screenwriters John August (*Big Fish*, lots of other Tim Burton and Disney movies) and Craig Mazin (*Chernobyl*, *Identity Thief*, etc.), has a couple of episodes that point out that t**he first song in most musicals** is the **"Here is our world" song,** which establishes the **status quo** and **the second is the protagonist's "I want" song**, which establishes **the protagonist's goal**.

In *West Side Story*: the first song is "Jet Song" - which begins "When you're a Jet, you're a Jet all the way from your first cigarette to your last dyin' day" and lays out the rules of membership in one of the two gangs in the story – and the second is "Something's Coming" in which Romeo...I mean Tony, talks about how he feels there's something more to life than just being a Jet and knows that an inciting incident is on the way.

West Side Story - Jet Song (1961) HD

West Side Story - Something's Coming (1961) HD

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It is sometimes helpful to think of the I^2 as the **'exciting' incident** as it is something consequential that "excites" the narrative into action. Some examples:

> *Finding Nemo*: Nemo goes near a boat and gets scooped up by a fisherman.
>
> *Die Hard*: Terrorists take over a building leaving only John to thwart them.
>
> *The Lion King*: Scar's plan to kill Mufasa succeeds.
>
> *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*: Elliott finds E.T., etc.
>
> *Jaws:* A girl is attacked by a shark.

You will often see page numbers associated with some of these elements. If you are one who craves detailed rules, then the rule of thumb is by page 10 of a 90-120-page screenplay. For a short, this means that you've got until about page 3 or 4.

Once the $\mathbf{I^2}$ has occurred, it acts as a catalyst for the move from the beginning to the middle, which is often called the **Second Act** but, for our purposes is where **complications/rising action** takes place. Using the "Elements of Three-Act Story Structure" rubric from the ***Story Basics*** chapter, this is where the protagonist comes up with **solutions** to the problem(s) keeping the goal out of reach.

Generally, in a second act, the **plot** takes a new turn, the pursuit of the goal may move in a new direction as the protagonist faces **obstacles**, gets closer, suffers setbacks.

At some point it looks as though the character may succeed (the **false ending**) until a **reversal** and all seems lost, the protagonist then battles back and reaches a **climax** which will turn the story towards a **resolution**.

This may be a **closed resolution** or a more **open resolution** that can be interpreted in different ways.

FROM BEGINNING TO MIDDLE

Some rubrics (such as Syd Field, whose book *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* is still very influential) call for a **plot point** (or **plot twist**) at the end of the first act that takes the story in a new direction. For those dedicated to precise formulas, Field places this at a fourth of the way through the story.

For the purposes of clarity, let's define what this **plot point/twist** might be.

It is not the I^2 but the I^2 should prompt it – generally it is the event that shows the protagonist that ignoring the I^2 isn't an option. Miss Gulch shows a court order to have Toto destroyed (I^2) but Toto escapes, Dorothy *could* just let Toto fend for himself, but, seriously? So she decides to run away with Toto and then the twister comes up, forcing her back to the farm, where she is set up to be whisked away over the rainbow to Oz.

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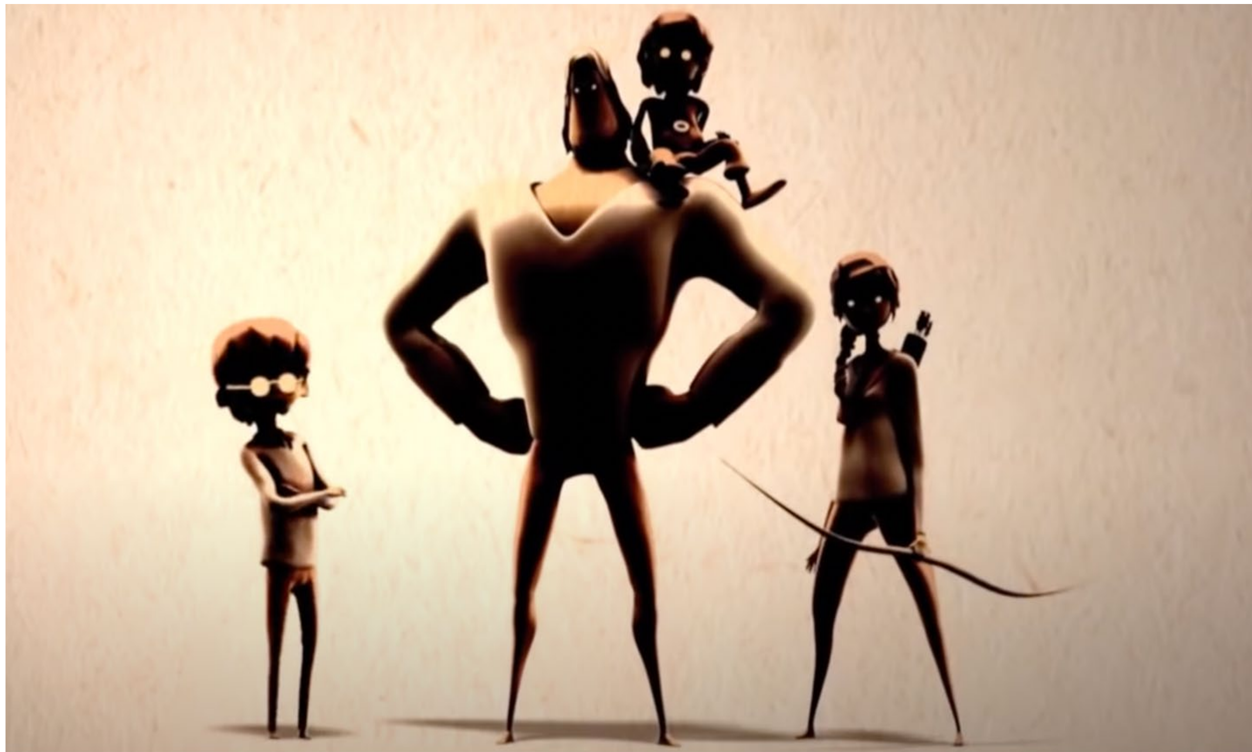
Under this rubric, the protagonist confronts the obstacles (the rising action) that move the story to the **midpoint,** where there is another **plot point/twist** or **major reversal** that sends the protagonist plummeting towards defeat.

The end of the Second Act has a **climax** which leads to the end of the script, the Third Act, which includes the **resolution**.

Within this paradigm you will find more specific details, such as those found in Joseph Campbell's "monomyth" from *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* aka "The Hero's Journey. "

The Hero's Journey according to Joseph Campbell



Others will prescribe certain scenes to go with certain moments such as a "metaphor scene" early in Act 2, or a "breather after the midpoint." But they are all variations on Campbell's analysis.

Shorts will sometimes contain most but not necessarily all of the above, which is not surprising since they are shorter than features. And yet they will have some sort of inciting incident (I^2), some sort of plot twist, and an ending. In all cases, a short film will have the same skeletal elements of what we define as a narrative.

WHAT MAKES IT A NARRATIVE?

Most of us intuitively have an understanding of story. When we are with friends and they start a story, we chastise them if there is no point to it.

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> My roommate and I went to the store…
>
> Yes and…?
>
> Nothing we went to the store.
>
> Whatever.

Compared to:

> My roommate and I went to the store, and she asked me to buy her some feminine hygiene products because she was embarrassed.
>
> I didn't want to, but she promised to do the dishes for a week.
>
> So, I go to the register and that girl I like in English class is standing behind me in line.
>
> I turned bright red. I didn't know what to do. So, I blurted out, "Science experiment."
>
> She smiled and told me that I will have to share how it turned out.

The driving force behind the story are cause and effect relationships.

There can be surprises but things should happen **within the logic of the world of the narrative**. If your story is set in a fantasy world where humans can fly, then a character flying away makes sense.

A story set in modern times with the characters having normal characteristics until, suddenly, a character flies is a problem -- unless this becomes the story. If actions occur randomly with no cause and effect, the audience loses interest.

These **cause-and-effect** moments show a character striving for a goal and culminate in a **climax** – which can serve to externalize an internal conflict. What often follows is what critic Lajos Egri calls the **obligatory scene** which explains the results of this climax and leads to the **resolution** of the film.

The essence of narrative is conflict – in the example above, why did going to the store matter? Only when it created a conflict between what a character wanted and what they had agreed to do.

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This conflict can be big or small, it can take many forms, but films without conflict lose that tension that keeps us engaged.

Indeed, the most common note from professional script readers when rejecting a script is often akin to: Scenes lack tension and therefore lose interest.

As mentioned in ***Story Basics***, conflict can take many forms:

- Character vs Character
- Character vs Society
- Character vs Nature
- Character vs Self (inner conflict needs to be externalized for film)
- Character vs Gods (Fate)

Depending on the composition of the world, the size of the conflict can be something as seemingly inconsequential as a stolen bicycle (funny in *Pee Wee's Big Adventur*e, tragic in *Bicycle Thieves*) or as large as the possible end of the world (tense in 28 Days Later, funny in *This is the End*).

The content will consist primarily of the points of conflict. In most romances, for example, the happy moments where the couple doesn't have a care in the world are usually very short and often presented as a **montage** — a series of shots with music underneath to quickly get to the next conflict.

Boring:

> They watch Netflix and chill, cuddle at the park, ride bikes to the beach.

Interesting:

> One lover's mother, who owns the company where the other lover works, doesn't approve.
>
> One is a Hatfield, the other a McCoy
>
> One lover's father is wanted by the sheriff, who happens to be the other lover's mother.

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UNITY OF NARRATIVE PURPOSE

It is important to embrace conflict. Many beginning writers have a tendency to avoid conflict. It's natural most of us—especially if we are not a$%holes—go through life trying to minimize conflict. So, embrace conflict—be like Bogart:

In a Lonely Place (1950) - Humphrey Bogart

Go toward not away from the conflict in your story just as filmmaker Dee Rees emphasizes and heightens the family tension in her first feature *Pariah*:

Pariah: Fight over Gendered Clothing

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At the same time, consider how the **inciting incident** ultimately relates to the **climax**. The I^2 forces the protagonist into an action. What does the Protagonist do? What does the protagonist want? What does the antagonist want? How is the protagonist more deeply involved?

This is where the idea of **theme** comes in. The more we can connect the cause and effect of the protagonist's actions as connected to their goal, the more organic our story will appear.

All of Quentin Tarantino's movies are about different things, but at their core, almost all of them are about revenge and that quest drives the protagonists' various journeys.

Barry Jenkins films (*Moonlight*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, *The Underground Railroad*) vary in setting but are about the way everyday people are caught up in larger societal forces they can't change.

Martin Scorsese's films are also quite varied but all concern the way his characters deal with their natural abilities – do they do strive to do good or just to do well? And how do they decide or do they know which is which?

As a result, we can talk about a Tarantino, a Jenkins, a Scorsese film and have people know what we mean.

A natural way to do this, is to have your character make choices that are significant to their ideas of themself and show the consequences of those actions.

Dilemmas are good as they clarify and often externalize internal conflicts. Your best friend offers you a ticket to your favorite band the same night you were supposed to take your partner out for dinner.

Another way to ensure good conflict is to create a strong antagonist. It is important to keep tension in the film to have an antagonist with equal power. Otherwise, you end up with a very short film. They do not have to be equal, just equivalent. They may have very different strengths but those strengths need to balance one another.

Consider *Pan's Labyrinth*—young Ofelia takes on the pale monster. She is a waif of a young girl, but the monster has some issues with vision.

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Pale Man in Pan’s Labyrinth (2006)

NARRATIVE BEATS

Narrative film can be broken down into **beats**, units of action that can be as short or as long as their importance to the story. A step in the development of many television and feature films is a “beat sheet” that lists what happens.

These usually:

Show a **protagonist** who quickly reveals a goal after some **inciting incident** sets things in motion.

Cause and effect relationships and **conflict** drive the protagonist’s journey.

The **First Act** ends with something that changes the game and leads to a reaction from the protagonist (anger denial etc.) and may shift the protagonist’s ultimate goal.

There are a **series of ups and downs** often leading to a moment where **things look like they will be settled** until a **major reversal** which forces the protagonist to **rededicate and face the final test** which will illustrate a **change in the character** (the character arc).

We can also frame this as a **protagonist**, who proves to be somehow compelling, encounters an **early setback**, goes on a **journey that induces a change** in character who then faces the **final test**.

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The **character arc** is tied into the theme of the narrative. With shorts this arc might not be entirely visible.

Regardless of length, your story may be a complicated one with twists and turns or it may be very character driven, remember the screenwriter's *möbius* will drive it either way — character drives action, and action reveals character.

And that action is fueled by conflict.

AUDIENCE POSITIONING

Beyond creating the pieces, we decide how to put the pieces together.

When do we reveal information and how? Do we let the audience know less than the characters, know the same amount, or know more? When do we give the audience background information and how much?

- Mystery – characters know more
- Suspense – know the same
- Dramatic Irony – audience knows more
- In this scene from *Cabaret* (dir. Bob Fosse, screenplay by Jay Presson Allen, music and lyrics by John Kander and Fred Ebb) -- most of us watching know what happens shortly after the singing of this song, but not all of the characters do:

In this scene from *Cabaret* (dir. Bob Fosse, screenplay by Jay Presson Allen, music and lyrics by John Kander and Fred Ebb) -- most of us watching know what happens shortly after the singing of this song, but not all of the characters do:

Tomorrow Belongs to Me - Cabaret

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How do we emotionally engage the audience? Whether they simply care about finding out what happens next or are so drawn into the protagonist that Dorothy/Luke/Harry/Frodo/Travis Bickle's journey feels like their journey, a story must keep the audience engaged.

What is the emotional rollercoaster you want to create?

Ernst Lubitsch, who was both a famous European silent film director and master of sound Era Hollywood (*Trouble in Paradise, Ninotchka, The Shop Around the Corner*) famously said the filmmaker should suggest "**2+2**" and **allow the audience to say "4**."

Keep the audience engaged by giving them enough but not too much. On the flip side, you don't want to overdo it. You can't expect the audience to take 27 and multiply it 538. There are limits.

STYLISTIC PARTICULARITIES

One of the crucial elements to screenwriting is remembering Robert Towne's notion of creating a movie in the reader's mind.

So, as we reveal the narrative, as we write the screenplay, we show the reader what they need to see and hear. We SHOW DON'T TELL.

And as we are showing what is on the screen, we do this in **present tense** with **action verbs**.

> Dirty Harry leans on the doorway, pulls out his gun, and snarls, "Feeling lucky punk?"

What he does NOT do:

> Harry leaned on the doorway. He pulled out his gun…

No "Harry *was* leaning." No "Harry *had* leaned."

ALWAYS PRESENT TENSE: Harry "leans," "pulls," "snarls," etc.

This is not a natural way of writing for many people and it takes some practice and vigilance. Many of us will slip from present tense to different forms of the past (past perfect, subjunctive, etc.) and will slip from active to passive verbs.

An easy way to remind yourself to do this is to think of a movie as a series of "nows."

> NOW, Harry leans.
>
> NOW Harry pulls the gun.
>
> NOW Harry snarls, "Feeling lucky, punk?"

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Then get rid of all the Now's Then's and Starts to's.

BEGINNING PRINCIPLES

As you formulate your beginning — your setup — think about the following:

- Whose story is it?
- What is the protagonist's goal?
- What are the obstacles?
- What does/should the viewer care about?
- What does/should the viewer wonder about?
- Does the viewer understand what the time frame is? (Past? Present? Future? Legendary?)
  Note: This may be very general or incredibly specific depending on the story.
- Has it established place?
- Has it set a tone?
- Has it set a tempo?

Once it is completed:

- Is it compelling?
- Does it have conflict?
- Does it flow from moment to moment, from scene to scene?
- How is exposition delivered?
- Does the climax payoff and reinforce the theme?
- How have you created your personal vision of this world?
- How have you considered how it accepts/challenges its genre?
- What tone is it?

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LENGTH

Shorts can be any length, but they tend to fall into 3 categories.

- The **short short**: 2-4 minutes, but could be 1 or 6
- The **conventional short**: 7-12 but it might be as much as 14 or 15
- The **long shor**t: 20-30 min generally but it could be 18 or it could be 35 or more

WHERE TO BEGIN?

Once you have a narrative where do you start?

It is often good to start as late as possible. Many classic narratives begin

> ***in media res*** – literally "in the middle of things"

We see the protagonist in the old world, until the inciting incident changes everything.

There are often **time/space/condition locks** -- situations that have essential boundaries -- that help clarify and focus the narrative. These are not required but are common and often effective:

> **Time lock** – Bond has 3 hours to find and defuse the nuclear bomb
>
> **Space lock --** The babysitter must escape from the haunted house.
>
> **Condition lock** – A shark must keep moving to stay alive; A flame must be kept going for the world not to freeze;

Speed famously had several locks: Stuck in a bus (space) bus will explode in an hour (time) and must keep the bus going sixty miles per hour (condition)

The key is to make the condition understandable in a short period of time, so that the world of the story doesn't become too random.

Regardless of length:

- Does it grab the audience?
- Is there a theme?
- is there a realistic timeframe?
- Is there some sense of a goal, rising action, a twist and a resolution?

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These might be shorter or longer, more detailed or just a hint depending on the format, but you should be able to articulate them in some fashion.

How are you creating curiosity: how are you stringing the audience on, via mystery, suspense or dramatic irony?

What is the crisis that creates obstacles — emotional, psychological or physical -- that the protagonist must overcome?

Once you’ve worked this out, you can move toward imagining your narrative as a script.

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IMAGINE YOUR NARRATIVE AS A FILM

These are some things to keep in consideration as you prepare to write.

Your goal is to create a **detailed world** of actions and reactions that will stretch in many different directions which will help elucidate the characters and develop the action – in effect creating a nuanced and complex *möbius*.

But only a small portion of what you imagine will end up in the actual screenplay. Though your **characters need to behave as if they have lived every day since they came into existence**, we're only interested in the parts that relate to the story. Thus, the screenplay (and film) itself will only contain a fraction of this world you have created – **the important parts**.

With this in mind, you will want to work with material you have some understanding of. Most importantly, **write about what you know and care about**. You can write stories that involve lots of research, but for your first project, you want to already have a solid understanding of that world. Trying to learn a new process and completely new world simultaneously is putting yourself in a position to get lost trying to do both.

Slightly different but related is the nature of your story. If you're all about fantasy realms, go there. If you're a huge sports fans, use that inherent conflict and drama. If there's a story or poem or joke or event that speaks to you, write it!

You want to create something that feels new and original but also give the audience a little bit of anchoring of things they can relate to. So using something that you yourself relate to is an exemplary first step.

But write it as a ***movie***. This will involve **putting careful thought into what you choose to include in the script and what you choose to leave out** of the script. But remember that writing anything is better than writing nothing. Don't allow agonizing over the perfect sequence, scene, beat, action, line or even a word short circuit the process. Keep it going.

EXPOSITION

As you develop your story there will be moments where you need to provide certain **information that is crucial to the story**, but that **you choose not to show**.

This is **exposition,** information that is told rather than shown. This is usually done with dialogue but not always: it can be **a close up of a letter**, a **revealing photograph** on the wall, etc.

If your exposition is too on the nose, then it might seem obvious to the viewer that they're being told "important information." This can undermine the feeling of getting lost in the story (suspension of disbelief).

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There are various tricks for hiding exposition or distracting the viewer so they forget that the backstory is being doled out. For example, if you need the viewer to know about something that wouldn't otherwise come up organically in the conversation between characters, you can have them doing something unusual or in the midst of heightened emotions (playing billiards, for example or riding a chair lift in a snowstorm.) that will take the viewers mind off a line like "I can't seem to maintain a relationship because I'm still trying to get over my horrible childhood."

Here is possibly a famous example.

Blue Pill or Red Pill - The Matrix (2/9) Movie CLIP (1999) HD

There is a specific kind of exposition called **backstory**. Most exposition is backstory but not all. Backstory is specifically exposition from the past.

If there is a large noise, and a character walks in and says "The Chevy out front just burst into flames," this would be **exposition**.

If the same character walked in and someone else says, "Aren't you the guy who blew up that Chevy five years ago," that would be backstory.

But keep in mind that not every bit of information is equally important – "blue pill/red pill" is key to understanding the world of *The Matrix*; whether or not a character went to a particular drugstore to buy their suicide pills is less important than **why** they are buying suicide pills.

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PLOTTING EFFICIENTLY

A **subplot** is a **secondary plot**, often called a **B-story**. When done well, it reinforces the plot in an unexpected way.

Successful subplots have their own **character arc** and bring depth to the story, creating a richer tapestry of the narrative world. They can be used to enhance character development -- of any character -- and they can **intensify conflict**, and **emphasize the theme**.

You can introduce them to mirror the main plot, contrast with the main plot, develop another element to the main plot, or develop other characters. They are especially effective at building tension. It is also a great **opportunity to develop a completely different point of view**.

If we go back to our example of Elvis – the **main plot** is that he has to win that race. But the **subplot** is often that he has to get that girl. (Elvis may have a different view of these priorities.)

Planting and Payoff or **Foreshadowing** is an important tool in creating an engaging story – a story that successfully triggers the chemicals that light the brain up. It can be embodied by a characteristic, an item, or a moment that seems inconsequential or unrelated to the plot at the time, but later comes back to play a crucial role.

These scenes from Amy Heckerling's *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* are a fun example.

Fast Times at Ridgemont High (7/10) Movie CLIP - He's Gonna Kill Us!

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Fast Times at Ridgemont High (8/10) Movie CLIP - Jefferson Makes Lincoln Pay

Coincidence: good or bad? “Negativity bias” is a term psychologists use that captures an essential element in narrative construction. The ancient brain – alert to when things go wrong – produces adrenaline and cortisol. We are wired to pay attention when things are going wrong.

So **we tend to accept bad coincidences** in stories because, if we ignored the sounds of a large creature foraging, we would be far more likely to be eaten by a bear.

We are much less likely to accept a good coincidence: We ignored the sounds and the bear is just about to eat us when a comet flashes across the sky and explodes knocking the bear down a steep gully from which he cannot escape.

Cue eye roll. But remember that a coincidence that makes the protagonist’s situation worse is more believable than a coincidence that helps the protagonist.

How did we get here? Sometimes the demands of logic call for a **bridge scene** – a bit of exposition that functions to get the audience from one important scene to the next. We can believe that Elvis is a race car driver if that’s what he starts out being, but if he’s suddenly also a pilot, we’re going to need to see him flying to the track or learning how to fly. No one, even Elvis, is the master of all trades.

MAKE IT VISUAL

Since a movie film presents images and sounds and ONLY images and sounds, you need to think about how your story will play out, **action by action**.

You may ask why it doesn’t do this **shot by shot**. (In fact, some types of scripts detail every shot and every sound cue (we’ll get to this when we work on the **A/V or two-column script**).)

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For the general reader, however, it's much easier to process a **simple statement** that calls to mind a **specific image** or a **specific action**:

```
EXT. MIDTOWN MANHATTAN - 33rd St. SUBWAY STATION – DAY

As CROWDS OF MASKED PEDESTRIANS exit their various
trains to go about their daily errands.

ALISON (20s, clown suit, clown makeup) rushes up in a
hurry, her iPhone by her ear.

A BUSINESS WOMAN (40s, well tailored pantsuit, pearls)
bustles past Alison, bumping Alison's phone hand and
knocking the iPhone to the curb.

Alison looks down to the curb where her iPhone fell.

ALISON'S iPHONE is teetering on the edge of the sewer
grate.

Alison GASPS.

Alison's iPhone tips up and falls into the sewer.

Alison's eyes fill with tears; she stamps her foot and
rushes to the grate.
```

Note that everything described is a **physical object** or **a being in physical space**.

Do we know exactly what this looks like?

Do we know what it sounds like?

Do we know what Alison is thinking?

Everything in a movie -- fiction, nonfiction, animation, documentary, avant-garde -- needs to be **something we can see** or **something we can hear**.

Apart from that, there are no limitations.

REALITY TESTING

Once you've got a draft of your full plot, ask yourself (or ask a friend after you share the story):

- Do you care?

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- Is it an interesting problem?
- Whose story is it?
- Is there enough importance to the problem? For the character, it might be a problem you wouldn't think is a big deal, but is it developed as a big deal for the characters in their world?

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BUILDING WITH SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

There are many different ways of getting started. Everyone has (or develops) a process that works for them Experimentation can help you find yours.

Here are the usual tools:

- Notecards
- Outlines
- Treatments
- Free writing from your premise

Each has pros and cons. A writer will find the method that fits their particular set of skills. The person who plans and keeps a detailed schedule of their day will likely want to start at the top end and aggregate the details as they work out the structure. The person who came to writing from an improv class will want to free write “Yes, and…” to the elements in their original premise till they get to an ending and boil it down to the best parts.

In her book *Bossypants*, Tina Fey describes the balance a writer needs to hit between these two impulses:

> “The writing staff of *Saturday Night Live* has always been a mix of hyperintelligent Harvard Boys and gifted, visceral, fun performers [...] too many of one or the other would knock the show out of balance … The Harvard Boys check the logic and construction of every joke, and the Improvisers teach them how to be human.”

So here are the basic “supporting documents” commonly used when organizing the vision of the story you have in your head into something that another person can read and obtain a close-enough vision of what you have in mind from the script you create:

PREMISE

The **premise** sets out the **central idea of the story**. It can be used to get you into the story.

> *Example*: ‘A lonely child befriends an alien.’

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Others—influenced by the use of the word in philosophy—use it more as **short setup of what the larger point of the film** is about: friendship, betrayal, etc.

As a writer you can see where both notions might be helpful in keeping you focused as you write.

In a professional setting **premise** is a vague term. If someone asks for your premise, you can start with the **central idea** and then move to the **larger point** (or vice versa), or ask them are they looking for the **major plotline** or the **deep idea** of your film.

LOGLINE

A **logline** is **a one sentence description of the film**. Like a haiku, it has some unique conventions—it generally does not mention character names, it usually describes the main conflict in one sentence. The logline usually does not include the ending.

If your sentence is too long (or more than one sentence) then you are probably getting too detailed.

If you c**annot distinguish it from any other film**, then you have gone **too general**.

The best way to get a feel for this is to try it out with your favorite films. As an example, name this film:

> When his son is swept out to sea, an anxious clownfish embarks on a perilous journey across a treacherous ocean to bring him back.

STEP OUTLINE

A step outline, often called a beat sheet is useful for giving your story structure. It lists each event in the film, emphasizing how the events are a string of cause-and-effect relationships.

Here is a version of a Step Outline for the Academy Award-winning short, *Kom*:

> “KOM”
> (1995, written and directed by Marianne Ulrichsen)
> (outlined by M. George Stevenson)
>
> 1. Old Woman sits with a cup of tea at a table in a family home surrounded by photos of a long life and winds a pocket watch, which she connects with a memory of a Young Man.
>
> 2. FLASHBACK: A Young Woman is at a seaside gathering that is clearly a vision of 40-50 years before and observes the celebration in progress: There is a small band playing dance music as a bonfire burns. Groups of townspeople use the occasion to do age-appropriate romantic things: A 30-ish Man and Woman

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make out – married to each other? Not married to each other? -- in a slightly secluded spot; Little Girls dance with each other; Young Men play at tossing a Another Young Woman onto the fire.

3. FLASHBACK (CONTINUED): The Young Woman fiddles with a pocket watch as she approaches a group of Young Men passing a bottle of alcohol; the Young Woman meets the eyes of the Young Man from the Old Woman's reminiscence; the Young Man meets hers. She reveals that she has a pocket watch; the Young Man checks and his is missing; the Young Man's Friends are amused.

4. FLASHBACK (CONTINUED): The Young Woman turns and walks away. The Young Man follows, when he reaches the Young Woman, she puts the watch into his vest pocket and tells him to "Come."

5. FLASHBACK (CONTINUED): The Young Woman leads the Young Man into a barn, then starts make out with him. After a moment, The Young Woman makes it clear that this is going all the way.

6. The Old Woman at her table, smiles in a youthful way. She winds the pocket watch.

7. The Old Woman puts the pocket watch suggestively into a vest pocket of an Old Man sitting on a couch. She leans into the Old Man and whispers "Come." The Old Man smiles -- he's seen this movie before.

End

KOM

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SCENE OUTLINE

This is written in an industry specific manner. Like a screenplay it uses scene headings. Also like a screenplay it should generally be written in present tense with action verbs. It does not include dialog. Under each heading, you describe the general action of the major scenes. Using the same rules for the **step outline**, a **scene outline** details every scene in the script, being very careful to give each scene a separate scene heading. Here is a snippet from *Snatch.*

```
53 INT. CAR -
Slow motion. Errol and John are looking for Tyrone.
54 EXT. FIELD
Slow motion. Cut back to the dogs. The chase starts.
55 INT. CAR
Slow, motion. They see Tyrone, Tyrone starts to run.
56 EXT. FIELD
Slow motion. The hare sees the, dogs and starts to run.
57 EXT. STREET
Slow motion. They bail Tyrone into the back of a car.
58 EXT. FIELD
Slow motion. The dogs move out in a pincer movement.
59 INT. BOOT OF A CAR
Poor Tyrone is bleeding in the boot of a car.
```

Coursing dog scene - Brad Pitt - Snatch

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It does NOT need to go into great detail of the scene, but gives the crucial plot information for each scene.

If there is a super iconic or crucial piece of dialog, it should be written out as if in a short story:

> Dirty Harry grimaces and raises his gun grunting out, "Make my day punk."

CHARACTER INTERVIEW(S)

Many screenwriters will create a character interview as a way toward a "Character Bible" (a document with a full dossier on a character—goals, needs, history, attitude, etc.), which is common in developing television series. The *Freaks and Geeks Bible* by show creator Paul Feig is a good example of how looking at each character from their own point of view can help define what basic conflicts/obstacles might organically arise.

TREATMENT

A **treatment** is the **prose version** of your story, written as if you were writing a short story of the narrative not a screenplay.

It should include the beginning, middle, and end. It should only detail what is going to be seen and what is going to be heard—it's still a movie, even though it's in prose.

Historically, treatments were up to 35 pages long for a feature. Now they can range anywhere from a page or two to forty.

They are increasingly less a requirement of the professional process but used by many writers to effectively develop the story. Find out if you are a treatment kind of person by writing one. If you are in a jam and struggling, it might help to write it out like a "real story" instead of a script.

Treatments can be developed by elaborating on your Step Outline—for example, here is a treatment for the film Kom—the step outline was shared earlier in this chapter.

> "KOM"
> A Treatment for the 1995 film by Marianne Ulrichsen
>
> In the kitchen of a bright Scandinavian Modern style apartment, HILDE (80s, Norwegian, gray-haired, thin, wearing a patterned 1950s-style house dress) sits at a table in front of a curtained window with a cup of tea, HUMMING. She hears the ticking of a watch and reaches for it, revealing that the room is decorated with FORMALLY POSED PHOTOS OF A MALE-FEMALE COUPLE AT SEVERAL

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STAGES OF YOUTH AND MIDDLE AGE. She winds the watch and FLASHES BACK to the memory of a young man, JESPER (20s, blond, athletic, wool cap, tweeds).

CUT TO YOUNG HILDE (20s, slim and vital, in a 1950s day dress) searching among the TOWNSPEOPLE at a VILLAGE HOLIDAY CELEBRATION on a ROCKY COASTLINE in the 1950s.

AN ACCORDIONIST PLAYS as LITTLE GIRLS and MIDDLE AGED MALE-FEMALE COUPLES dance around a central BONFIRE and VILLAGERS LAUGH and CHAT. TWO LATE-TEEN BOYS (Scandinavian, wearing vests and corduroy pants) roughly play at tossing a SCREAMING LATE-TEEN GIRL (who wears a modest dress and sweater) onto the fire.

A 30-ish MAN IN A BUSINESS SUIT and a WOMAN IN A FITTED DRESS seriously make out by a slightly secluded barn wall – married to each other? Not married to each other? – and scatter as Young Hilde comes around the corner.

Young Hilde fiddles with a pocket watch as she moves past the wall and sees a group of YOUNG MEN (20s, Norwegian, dressed as fisherman or outdoor laborers) sharing a bottle of alcohol by a rock outcrop that shelters boat gear.

Among them is Jesper. Young Hilde meets Jesper’s eyes; Jesper meets hers. Hilde dangles the pocket watch. Jesper checks and his is missing; Young Men are amused. Young Hilde turns and walks away toward the fire.

Jesper follows, when he reaches Young Hilde, she puts the watch into his vest pocket and tells him to “Come.”

Young Hilde leads Jesper inside the barn, then starts make out with him. It gets heavy very quickly and Young Hilde leads Jesper’s hands toward her breasts and private parts. As Jesper’s hand reaches its goal…

HARD CUT TO HILDE AT THE TABLE, GASPING IN PLEASURE, then smiling in a youthful way. She winds the pocket watch.

In the Living Room of their apartment, Hilde slides the pocket watch suggestively into a vest pocket that belongs to OLD JESPER (80s, not thin but still fit, in a button-down), sitting on a couch. Hilde leans into the Old Man and whispers “Come.”

Jesper smiles – he knows where this is going.

THE END

Some screenwriters go further than this. James Cameron is famous for writing what he calls “scriptments,” which are even more detailed, such as this one for The Terminator. Each writer finds a sweet spot.

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SYNOPSIS

The synopsis was historically an internal document for the filmmaking bureaucracy. As such it is a short (evolving from a page to a paragraph) summary that gives the beginning, middle, and end of the story. It should focus as much as feasible on the unique aspects of the film.

Synopses are now often used in festival guides and consumer-facing descriptions – i.e., a longer description than a logline, but still not a treatment. (This is slightly different and for films with a big surprise will probably read differently – i.e., not give away the big twist.) If you look at the "Synopsis" section of films on IMDb, you will see everything from a paragraph to a multipage document – none are wrong but it's up to you to decide the level of detail that is helpful to your process.

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FORMAT YOUR SCREENPLAY

In the old days, this would comprise half the class. Learning how to set the tabs on typewriters, formatting each element properly, understanding how and when to do each item. Endlessly revising to get it right. Fortunately, this is all done by screenwriting software these days. So, it goes from weeks of long lessons to a mere footnote (well… maybe not that easy but…).

The reasons for this formatting go back to Hollywood—and the ways that those complicated tabs and typewriters worked (for example, no underlines because that key cut the paper like scissors; lots of CAPS because there was a CAPS LOCK that made typists' lives easier).

The conventions of a screenplay were also developed because screenplays are transitional documents—scripts—and the format helps to ease that transition. Regardless of where you are working, these conventions have become industry standard far and wide.

In other words, the purpose of a script is to create a map to guide the making of the film. That's where the story will live. The words on the page are only there to serve this transition. The conventions of a screenplay were developed to ease that transition.

There are specific margins and formatting rules that are expected for all screenplays:

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[SCREENPLAY FORMAT CHEAT SHEET] ^[0.5 inch top margin] [page number]> 1
1.5- inch margin >FADE IN:<[Transition, ALL CAPS always] [0.75-inch margin>
one-line space> v [locations are either INT or EXT] [It's DAY or NIGHT, v DAWN or DUSK ONLY!]
Location slug>INT. SCREENPLAY/TELEPLAY FORMAT CENTER – DAY <[ONE LINE ONLY!]
one-line space>
Screen directions that say what the location looks like in
brief but telling detail.
one-line space> v [Use a new paragraph to introduce a new character]
SCRIPTA (20s, attractive, dressed like a pirate) stands in the
location, doing something that the screen directions describe.
Scripta suddenly stands at attention:
one-line space>
indent to 4.25 inches> SCRIPTA <[ALL CAPS here, always]
1.5-inch L/R indent> I love to speak dialogue!
indent to 2.5 inches> (feels parenthetical) <[ONE LINE ONLY!]
But only after I've been
introduced in the screen direct-
ions by name in ALL CAPS, fol-
lowed by a brief description in
parentheses!
one-line space>
WRITOR (30s, rugged, long-haired in a flight suit) runs into
the room. He stands in front of Scripta and salutes her in the
British military style as a SOUND EFFECT is added and noted in
ALL CAPS because it's a cue for the sound department.
one-line space>
indent to 4.25 inches> WRITOR <[ALL CAPS here, always]
1.5-inch L/R indent> I also love to speak dialogue
and be introduced in ALL CAPS!
But I prefer being referred to
afterwards with an initial
capital!
indent to 2.5 inches> (conspiratorially) <[ONE LINE ONLY!]
Not only that, but I love to
indent my parenthetical instruc-
tions of no more than one line!
one-line space>
indent to 4.25 inches> SCRIPTA <[ALL CAPS here, always]
1.5-inch L/R indent> I love that, too! But,like ev-
erything else in the screenplay,
it must be in Courier New 12!
And nothing in bold ever!
one-line space>
Scripta and Writor embrace and kiss passionately. Amid their
feverish making out, they speak.
one-line space>
indent to 4.25 inches> WRITOR <[ALL CAPS here, always]
1.5-inch L/R indent> Will we ever be in an exterior
or EXT., my love?
one-line space>
Scripta turns Writor's head toward the wall.
v [0.75-inch bottom margin]

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^[0.5 inch top margin] [page number]> 2

one-line space> v [Use new paragraph to suggest a change in shot size or POV shot]

A CLOCK ON THE WALL<[needs to be seen clearly and so in ALL CAPS] shows it is noon.

one-line space>

indent to 4.25 inches> SCRIPTA <[ALL CAPS here, always]

1.5-inch L/R indent> Yes, but only in the DAY,NIGHT, DAWN or DUSK! Our creators may only show or have someone say a specific time of day!

one-line space>

indent to 4.25 inches> WRITOR <[ALL CAPS here, always]

1.5-inch L/R indent> Oh, Scripta! This is the first time the audience knows your name! Until now they've just known you as a woman dressed like a pirate!

one-line space>

Scripta pulls out a JEWELED SCIMITAR <[which is an unusual prop and so in ALL CAPS] and holds it to Writor's throat.

one-line space>

indent to 4.25 inches> SCRIPTA <[ALL CAPS here, always]

1.5-inch L/R indent> Did I TELL you to say my name? If so, it would be in ALL CAPS which is the only way to empha-size something in a screenplay!

one-line space>

indent to 4.25 inches> WRITOR <[ALL CAPS here, always]

indent to 2.5 inches> (struggling) <[ONE LINE ONLY!]

1.5-inch L/R indent> Whoa! Why? Did I center some-thing?

one-line space> [Use ALL CAPS for non-verbal character actions] v

Scripta holds the blade closer to Writor's throat and GROWLS.

one-line space>

DISSOLVE TO: <[Transition, ALL CAPS always]

one-line space> v [locations are either INT or EXT] v [It's DAY or NIGHT, DAWN or DUSK ONLY!]

Location slug>EXT. COUNTRY GRAVEYARD – NIGHT <[ALL CAPS here, always]

one-line space>

As the WIND HOWLS, Scripta, wearing a sexy evening gown, dabs her eyes in the moonlight, looking at something near her feet.

one-line space> v [Use new paragraph to suggest a change in shot size or POV shot]

In front of her is a HEADSTONE that reads "WRITOR MAUVAISE."

one-line space>

indent to 4.25 inches> SCRIPTA <[ALL CAPS here, always]

1.5-inch L/R indent> Oh, Writor! Why did you center that dialogue? Why? Why?

one-line space> [Use ALL CAPS for non-verbal character actions] v

Scripta throws herself on the grave and WAILS.

one-line space>

END CREDITS <[Transition, ALL CAPS always]

v [0.75-inch bottom margin]

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Remember each place a scene occurs has its own Scene Heading—why? so that when the production team breaks down a script, they can easily differentiate each scripted location.

SCENE HEADING

The **Scene Heading** has a very specific form:

- Whether it is inside or outside (Important for the various production departments to know)
- The location (equally important)
- The time of day (how to prepare)

This is a one-line summary that gives the crew the basics of equipment and preparations.

```
EXT. DON'S HOUSE - BACK PATIO - DUSK
```

Notice the extra specificity about location: This is still in DON'S HOUSE, but a specific part of it that is about it. Each room in the house is a different location that will require a new lighting set up so must be listed in the scene heading.

and time of day: DUSK is neither

DAY (the sun is out -- producers/camera/lighting people adjust accordingly) nor

NIGHT (the sun ISN'T out -- producers/ camera/lighting people adjust accordingly)

but at the transition between DAY and NIGHT, one of the two "Golden Hours" when the light is that beautiful orange-y color you try to capture in vacation photos (producers/camera/lighting people adjust accordingly).

Keep it clear and simple but general -- you can't see a specific time (10 am, 9 pm) without showing a clock or watch; "MORNING" and "AFTERNOON" are just DAY; and, depending on where you come from, "EVENING" can mean DAY, DUSK or NIGHT.

SCENE DESCRIPTIONS

This the meat of your screenplay. This is where you illuminate the action using present tense and action verbs. There are also a few conventions for **Scene Descriptions**, sometimes called "action lines."

Unless it's important to see something first, they generally move from the general to the specific:

```
INT. DON CORLEONE'S HOUSE - OFFICE - DAY

This is a grand, formal space, richly
appointed with dark wood furniture. The walls
```

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```
have dark wood details and dark wallpaper.
The lighting is also dark -- a few floor
lamps and a desk lamp on the huge but neatly
organized desk with blotter and other 1940s
accoutrements. The Venetian blinds are also
wood and reveal, surprisingly, that it's
daytime outside.

BUONASERA (40s, looks 60s, pathetically tiny
comb-over on a massively bald head) is
dressed in an old school tuxedo and looks
small sitting in a chair pulled up to the
desk.

Buonasera seems nervous and speaks haltingly
to an unseen person on the other side.
```

It's up to you, but remember to structure things so that we "see":

1. Where we are
2. Who is there
3. What they're doing.

The first time the audience sees a character (not when they are mentioned) their `NAME` is in `ALL CAPS`. My theory on this convention is that actors are vain narcissists (if you are an actor and get mad please see this) and need to quickly see where they fall in the film (and then start reading from there).

Historically, `SOUND EFFECTS` are `CAPITALIZED`.

The key to the structure of the scene description is action down the page. You can develop your own style, rich in detail and florid writing or spare and the literary equivalent of a grunt.

It's up to you, but if you don't go overboard on the detail -- the room is "fashionably decorated" -- you don't need to detail each piece of furniture unless it's vitally important (Col. Mustard in the living room with the candlestick) -- your screenplay should time out to roughly a minute of screen time per page.

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DIALOGUE

When characters speak, there is a specific way to format it:

- Character name – All caps, at the specified margin:

```
                    CHARACTER
```

- Lines of dialog – different margins, directly underneath character name:

```
                    CHARACTER
            What the character is saying
```

- If that speaker is narrating or not in the frame, that is noted on the CHARACTER line

```
                    CHARACTER (O.S) or (V.O.) etc.
            What the character is saying
            offscreen
```

- If that speaker needs to say something a particular way or do something while speaking, this information is put under the CHARACTER LINE in parentheses, within its own margin (a **parenthetical**) :

```
                    CHARACTER
                (sarcastically)
            What the character is saying
```

- Certain **scene directions** that are not put in the scene description also fall in this **parenthetical** place – DO NOT USE THIS OPTION A LOT.

```
                    CHARACTER
                (juggling chainsaws)
            What the character is saying
```

Earlier I said, partially tongue in cheek, that actors are narcissists—perhaps, but that is the character flaw that allows them to take your written words and develop a convincing lifelike and complex representation for the audience.

They are good at their job. Don't tell them how to do it. Give them the tools, by all means, by developing a thoughtful story where actions reveal complex characters. Do not constantly tell them what to do:

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Actors hate that—and they should, if you have to do that, then you haven't done your job writing!

Think about it this way, do you like it when your boss micromanages you? That's what parentheticals are to actors.

TRANSITIONS

Transitions have their own margins. For early screenwriters should be used as a convention to imply a certain passage of time or a purposefully abrupt change.

```
...last line of a scene description.

                                        DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. NEW SCENE HEADING – DAY

New scene description....
```

There are some special cases, but this is enough to get started.

KEEPING FORMAT IN MIND AS YOU WRITE

First and foremost, your screenplay illuminates what we **SEE** and **HEAR**. You can add some stylistic elements, a window into their thoughts and ideas (often helpful to the actors) but the focus needs to be on what we see and hear.

A common trap is to slip into fiction writing, giving us internal thoughts, history or supporting ideas that may be crucial to the character but are inaccessible to a film audience.

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For example (note that this is not in Courier because it shouldn't be in a screenplay):

> "John walks into the room and sees a chair. It reminds him of his brother who he found after he hung himself in his dorm room. John quit school after this and never returned. It drove him into a cycle of dead-end jobs and addiction which he was only now addressing."

What an audience would see in this scene:

> John walks into the room and sees a chair.

That's it. The rest of that passage is not seen or heard in the scene.

Keep in mind, you are **working in words** but **the result is in images**.

Related to this is limiting action to the scene you are describing. Each **location** receives a scene heading.

So John wakes up, brushes his teeth, makes breakfast, gets dressed, drives to work and sits down at his desk.

In a screenplay, this will be several different scene headings because every location – bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, closet, garage, road, office—will need a separate **scene headin**g.

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Remember how Guy Ritchie breaks this down into separate scenes in *Snatch*:

53 INT. CAR –

Slow motion. Errol and John are looking for Tyrone.

54 EXT. FIELD

Slow motion. Cut back to the dogs. The chase starts.

55 INT. CAR

Slow, motion. They see Tyrone, Tyrone starts to run.

56 EXT. FIELD

Slow motion. The hare sees the, dogs and starts to run.

57 EXT. STREET

Slow motion. They bail Tyrone into the back of a car.

58 EXT. FIELD

Slow motion. The dogs move out in a pincer movement.

59 INT. BOOT OF A CAR

Poor Tyrone is bleeding in the boot of a car.

60 EXT. FIELD

The dogs move in.

61 EXT. CAR

They bail Tyrone out of the car and into Brick Top's pub. Brick Top is waiting there. Brick Top asks questions. We can't hear what he's asking, but we can see that Tyrone isn't playing the game.

62 EXT. FIELD

The dogs are moving in.

63 INT. DOG HOUSE

A door opens and Tyrone tumbles in. A rabid Neapolitan mastiff pitbull hybrid that is attached to the end of a long pole with a lasso at the other end is brought in, it will quite clearly savage anything in its way.

64 EXT. FIELD

The hare gets caught and a pile of fur comes up

65 INT. DOG HOUSE

The dog bites Tyrone in the leg. Tyrone shouts in panic, the music breaks.

TYRONE
Ok, I'll fuckin tell you.

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Notice how each scene gets a heading regardless of how long the camera will linger. Also notice how this action extends down the page.

Screenplays have a relationship with screen time. The accepted convention is that a page of a screenplay roughs out to a minute of screen time. This is not an exact relationship but usually evens out over the length of a script.

As such, a screenplay is written down the page rather than across it. This means that actions flow down the page. You can write very densely or very sparingly, but the actions should have a relationship to time as seen above.

Here is another example. If you were writing *Point Break* (1995) You would need to do more than write:

Johnny wipes out and is saved by Tyler.

To indicate this:

[Point Break (1991) - Enter Tyler Endicott]

Here is an excerpt of the script from Kathrine Bigelow's film (script by Peter Iliff) to give you a rough idea what this scene might look like on the:

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```
OCEAN BREAK
A horizon of whitecaps churn behind him.
He lies on his board, rising and dropping with the swell. So far so good. He
spots a wave.  A fluid gray-green house rising, forever rising.  Utah turns.
Paddles.  Thehouse catching him, lifting him high upon its roof.

Utah is committed. He gets to his feet as his board slices along the lip.
He peers over the falls, down theface -- holy shit! -- it looks like
Niagara. He loses balance and spirals airborne, falling bullseye into the
IMPACT ZONE.  The entire force of the wave crashing uponhim, plunging him
down into the--

WASHING MACHINE (UNDERWATER)

where he SPINS like a whirling dervish, LASHED to a  slamdancing surfboard at
the mercy of God.
He is held prisoner in a grey-green churning nightmare, like a six-ton pit
bull has him by the neck, shaking him. He looks around.  Can't tell up from
down.
WHAM! His head slams into the bottom -- rocks and sand. Stunned, he struggles
toward the light, finally burstingto the--

SURFACE.  Gasping for breath.
The good news is he's breathing, the bad news is he's  surfaced in the impact
zone. Another wave crashes down, stuffing him back into the washing machine.
Leaving no sign of life in the white froth.  The orangeade surfboardlaunches
high into the sky, spinning like a misfiring Trident missile, trailing its
broken leash like a kite tail.

IN THE WASHING MACHINE, Utah tumbles in a cold green hell. His chest is
convulsing, needing air now.
Suddenly a FIGURE lunges down INTO FRAME.
A hand snatches a fistful of his hair and yanks himtoward--

THE SURFACE. The WOMAN SURFER bursts through the foam.  Grabs her board for
leverage.  Hauls Utah's head above thewater with one strong arm.
He is choking, coughing, slapping fatigued arms againstthe
surf, panic registering in his movements.




                           WOMAN SURFER
                  (yelling above the roar)
        Swim, goddammit! Come on! Moveit!

The woman gets her board under one of his arms for supportand sidekicks
fiercely into the wave, holding him in a painful grip.
With powerful strokes, she helps Utah make it to calmer water outside the
break.  The big waves, just forming up, lift them and drop them as they pass.
Muted thunder whenthe waves hit the beach.  She drags him half onto her
surfboard.
Practically slamming his face into the board.
```

Notice a very different style for the action. Much denser than *Snatch*. But it also runs down the page, giving detail such that it tracks fairly closely with real time.

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A couple of other format challenges that dog new scriptwriters are:

- **Inserts**: An insert shot is a shot of some item that is seen on its own so the audience can get clearly see the information it contains. The most common is clock, a letter, a photo…

  How to do an insert shot:

```
Amber looks at the framed photo.

INSERT - THE OLD PHOTO

is of a handsome, young flight candidate in
uniform, with a stylish little moustache and
dark bedroom eyes.

BACK TO SCENE
```

  Or like this:

```
Amber turns her head fully facing the TV.

Carol Anne smiles. A smile much too
sophisticated for a five-year-old child.

ON TV SCREEN: The snow mixes with new imagery.
Forms. Vague but luminous. Always mingling.
Impressionistic. Never hard-lined.

Amber looks away.
```

- **Intercutting:** A popular device is the phone conversation that consists of two separate scenes going back and forth between speakers. This is an instance of intercutting:

```
INT. AMBER'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Amber, fully dressed, lies on her double bed,
phone in hand.

                 AMBER
        Seriously?

INTERCUT WITH:
```

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```
INT. CAROL ANNE’S BEDROOM – NIGHT

Carol Anne, in nightclothes, lies on her cot,
phone in hand.

                 CAROL ANNE
        Seriously.

Amber makes a face.

Carol Anne LAUGHS.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. FOOTBALL FIELD – DAY

Etc.
```

- **Other formatting issues:** You can find helpful details on a variety of specific issues at Whatascript.com as well as in the COMPLEAT SCREENPLAY FORMAT GUIDE.

REMEMBER THE BIG PICTURE

One last quiz as you put pen to paper (fingers to keyboard etc…)

- What is the story?
- Who is the protag?
- What is their want or goal?
- What do they get?
- Can we see story contours by I^2 ?
- Is this the story you want to tell?
- Do you believe it?
- What did we learn?

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WHY WRITERS TODAY HAVE IT EASY

You can easily find and use a **free screenwriting program:** Celtx or choose your favorite from here.

Once you've chosen your program, make sure you get the components you use down:

- **Scene Heading**
- **Scene Description**
- **Character Name** (parenthetical for voice over or off screen only)
- **Dialogue**
- **Transitions**

To get in the habit, you might consider writing your scene and/or step outline using the screenwriting program. You will write your **Scene Heading** then summarize the scene in the scene description. No dialog.

Not everyone likes to break things down into what many screenwriting programs include as **Index Cards**, which are the individual steps or scenes, which can be moved around easily. Others prefer actual index cards.

One advantage is that it will translate your outline into screenplay format more directly. Others feel that it's important to conceive ideas outside the format. As always, do what works for you.

Practice a bit and compare your formatting to the examples here:

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VAT 153/Scriptwriting Prof. M. George Stevenson

THE COMPLEAT SCREENPLAY FORMAT GUIDE

Screenplay formatting isn't rocket surgery. If you follow some simple rules, which are laid out here. Final Draft and Celtx do a lot of this automatically, but it should still look like this:

1. Typeface: Use `COURIER NEW 12.` Why? The 1-page = 1 minute formula is based on this typeface and margin settings. NO **BOLDING** or *ITALICS* EVER! Use underlining for emphasis.
2. Margins: Left = 1.5 in. (to make room for hole punches for when it's bound)
   Right = 0.75 in.
   Top = 0.5 in. with a header of one line and formatted page number in top right;
   Bottom = 0.75 in.
3. Spacing: Single spacing, ALWAYS. Some elements, such as location slugs, paragraphs (aka ¶s), etc. are followed by an extra line-space.
4. Location slugs: ALL CAPS, full margins, flush left. [For our purposes, we won't use scene numbers; don't worry about them.]

   Example:

```
{1.5" Margin} EXT. AMBERSON MANSION - DAY
  {line-space}
              An imposing Victorian mansion with a mansard roof, surrounded
              by well tended grounds.
  {line-space}
              A carriage drawn by two horses pulls into the porte-cochere
              and stops.
```

5. Screen directions (abbreviated as "S.D."): Full margins (1.5" left/0.75 right), normal capitalization.
6. Character name before dialogue: ALL CAPS at Left margin + 2.5 in. (equivalent to 5 default tabs to right, basically the middle of the margin)–CENTERING IS WRONG AND HAZARDOUS TO YOUR GRADE!

   Example:

```
{1.5" Margin} He faces the fireplace and looks into the dying embers.
    {line-space}
                                      MAJOR AMBERSON
                        It must be … the sun. The sun was
                        here before everything and we came
                        after the sun…
 {line-space}
              George looks at his grandfather from the entryway [...]
```

[This is the first page of a larger document, which can be found here.]

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In the end, you want something to end up looking like this classic example (page 1 of David Benioff and D.B. Weiss's pilot screenplay for *Game of Thrones*):

```
EXT. CLEARING - DAY

Snow drifts across the bodies of the fallen dead. Eight
corpses lie frozen on the ground-- men, women, and children,
wearing heavy furs. The wind whips through their long hair.

At the edge of the clearing, WILL (20), a young ranger
dressed all in black, surveys the grim scene from the back of
his gelding. He gathers his reins and guides his horse south.

EXT. FOREST - DUSK

Will rides hard between the towering pines, his horse's
hooves kicking up fresh-fallen snow.

He comes to a halt and dismounts beside two tethered horses.
His comrades, GARED (50) and SER WAYMAR ROYCE (18), crouch
beside a stream, filling their skins with cold water. They
rise and look to the newcomer expectantly.

Ser Waymar is gray-eyed and graceful, with an aristocrat's
air of command despite his youth. He wears a supple coat of
gleaming black ringmail and a lush sable cloak.

Will and Gared also wear the black of the Night's Watch, but
their clothes are far less regal, their leather and fur
battered from hard usage. Gared wears a hood for warmth.

                    WILL
          We should start back. They're all
          dead.

Gared offers Will his water skin and Will takes a drink.

                    SER WAYMAR
          Any blood?

                    WILL
          Not that I saw.

                    SER WAYMAR
          How close did you get?

                    WILL
          Close enough to see they was dead.

                    SER WAYMAR
              (skeptical)
          Or sleeping?

                    GARED
          If Will says they're dead, they're
          dead. We should head back to the
          Wall.
```

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WRITING SCENES

Each scene should serve a purpose, revealing character and driving action, delivering information, entertaining (emotional moments, clever dialog, sweeping vistas, spectacle). You decide what we see and don't see.

Scenes should **start late**, **end early**, **reveal conflict**, **build emotion**.

Where you start your scene or story is called the **point of attack**. Work to move the point of attack as late as possible.

Tips:

- **Limit the number of characters** in a scene—your friend group might be many but for a story, too many people to keep straight dilutes the focus.
- Focus on **emotional truth** rather than everything that's going on—the point of the scene needs to be the **main conflict**;
- Make sure the scene is **not a variation of a previous scene** (don't replay same conflict over and over—save that for therapy)

A scene can be thought of playing out its own three-act/beginning-middle-end structure:

- There is a scene protagonist who is driven by a goal that is informed by an inner need. This generates a specific goal of the scene which leads to the result.
- There will be a scene antagonist, a character or situation that is - or appears to be—an obstacle to the protagonist's goal.

  Importantly, these may not be the same as the protagonist and antagonist of the story overall. Like the larger story, each scene needs a specific goal which leads from a perceived conflict to a result.

Notice the beginning middle and end in this scene from *Y Tu Mama Tambien.*

Y Tu Mamá También - Luisa's first time

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BEATS

Within a scene are **beats**. A beat is a **unit of conflict**, a paired action/reaction.

There can be small beats and large ones.

A minor beat:

JAN
Where do you want to go for dinner?

ANDY
Thai?

JAN
Last time gave me diarrhea

ANDY
TMI

JAN
Burger?

ANDY
If you wanted a burger why did you say so... Fine Scottish cuisine?

JAN
With a dollar menu!

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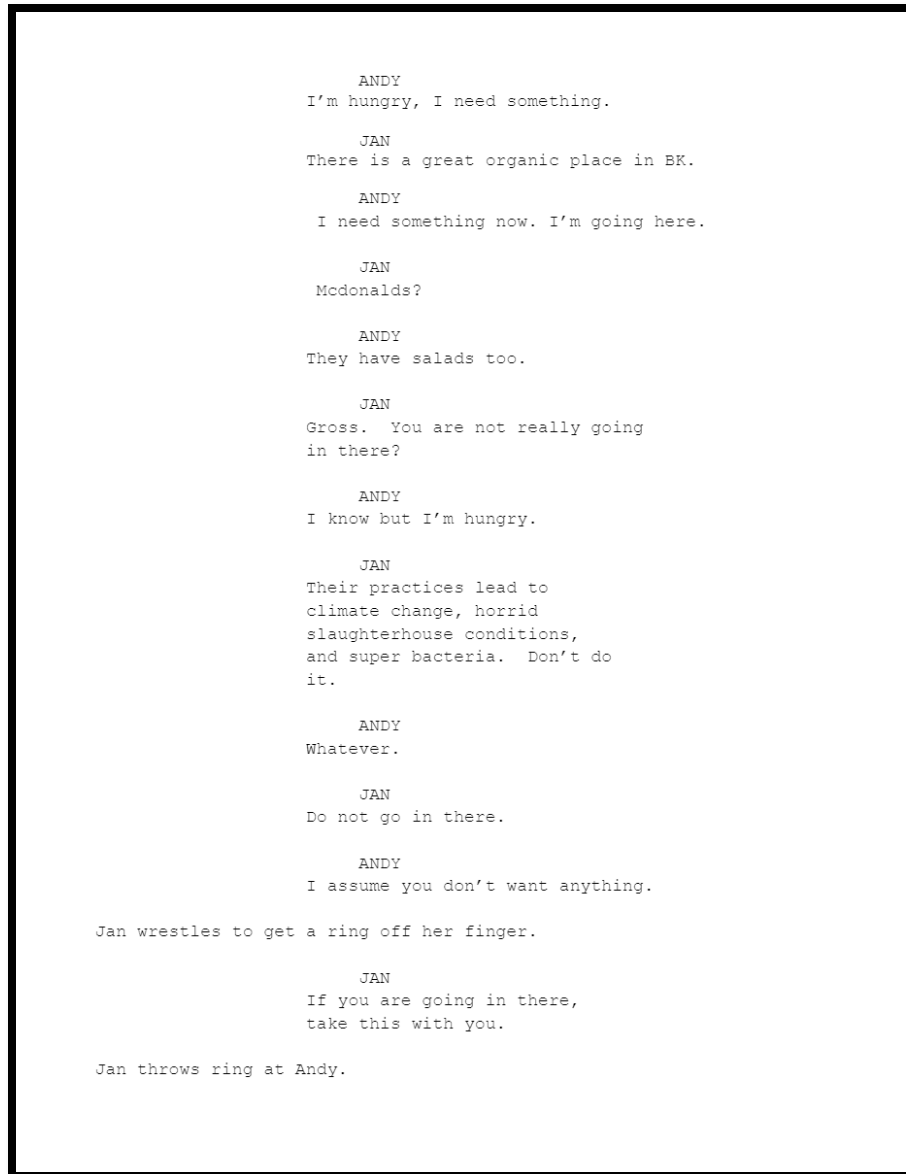
A major beat:



```
                    ANDY
               I'm hungry, I need something.

                    JAN
               There is a great organic place in BK.

                    ANDY
                I need something now. I'm going here.

                    JAN
                Mcdonalds?

                    ANDY
               They have salads too.

                    JAN
               Gross.  You are not really going
               in there?

                    ANDY
               I know but I'm hungry.

                    JAN
               Their practices lead to
               climate change, horrid
               slaughterhouse conditions,
               and super bacteria.  Don't do
               it.

                    ANDY
               Whatever.

                    JAN
               Do not go in there.

                    ANDY
               I assume you don't want anything.

Jan wrestles to get a ring off her finger.

                    JAN
               If you are going in there,
               take this with you.

Jan throws ring at Andy.
```

One is a minor conflict with little consequences as far as we can tell. The other is a big beat, ending with the breaking off of an engagement.

PUTTING SCENES TOGETHER

Whether working from a treatment, an outline, notecards, or a premise, you will be faced with two regular questions:

1. Whether the scene needs to be included?
2. What scene should come next?

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To answer the first question, ask yourself: Do the specifics of the scene contribute to the story? Consider what the story is about and how this scene serves a purpose in that story. The characters make choices. Every choice has consequences. If it doesn't have a consequence is that a choice the audience needs to view?

To answer the second question, ask yourself: How does the scene moves the story forward? Now you've decided it is truly needed, balance what we know of what has happened before, and what now must happen as a consequence.

Remember Aristotle and his advice—**the audience must feel pity for the suffering of the protagonist and empathize and hence fear what is coming next**. The hero's opponent leverages the hero's weakness (flaw) that must be overcome—or at least tries to overcome.

But don't tell the audience how to feel or how they should feel—show them. Build empathy and show them actions that will build emotion.

EMBEDDING THE EXPOSITION

As you are writing scenes, you will need to build in exposition - the information that lets an audience know they're dealing with Don Corleone, fond father and the head of the Corleone crime family, rather than a random Italian importer.

But exposition should not be the only reason for a scene. If the whole scene is only to share exposition go back to work on the scene and make sure it is serving more than that solitary function.

One of the reasons that setting the opening of *The Godfather* at a wedding is so brilliant is that it enables exposition to happen in an environment in which it happens naturally:

```
INT. ATLANTIC BEACH WEDDING HALL – DAY

Amid the crowd, Jenny holds Bill's arm for dear
life - she doesn't know a soul.

A SHORT MAN (30s, porn 'stache, royal blue tuxedo)
waves at Bill.

                JENNY
        Who's that?

                BILL
        My cousin, the greengrocer.
```

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```
MONA LISA VITO (50s, flamboyantly gorgeous in an
evening gown that shows offer her great physical
condition and complements her upswept hairdo) sees
Bill, SQUEALS, and throws her arms out for a hug.

                MONA LISA
        Bill!  Long time no see!

Bill stops in his tracks, then hugs Mona Lisa as
if she were his long lost mother.

                BILL
        Mona Lisa!  I haven't seen you
        since you helped Cousin Vinny
        get us out of jail in Alabama!

Jenny is horrified …

… until Mona Lisa rolls her eyes and pushes Bill
away with a SCOFF.
```

In the scene below, Chris Eyre and Sherman Alexie convey a great deal of information about these characters and their experiences growing up as Native Americans. Yet the writers bring this across in language that is authentic to the characters so that the audience doesn't feel that they are being given a history lesson about the brutality of colonization. This is a movie, not a lecture about Hollywood and its representation of indigenous people. So the writers allow the characters to speak about these issues in a way that comes from their own lives. A great example of how to embed exposition.

Smoke Signals (3/12) Movie CLIP - How to Be a Real Indian (1998) HD

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TUNING UP THE SCENE

Questions for each scene:

- Why is it needed? What does the scene do?
- Time/Setting
- Who is there?
- Who is the scene protagonist?
- What do they want?
- What is the conflict?
- What is/are the beats?
- What is the subtext?

Do this checklist for every beat of every scene. Since you'll do it more than once—literally every time you go through your sequence of events to make sure you're on track, get used to it.

But you'll be surprised by how often you'll find that you've either repeated the same beat or left out something necessary. View it like a sculptor does a chisel—a tool that helps you realize your full vision.

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FASHIONING DIALOG

We all like a good piece of dialog.

Whether it is serious:

"Go ahead, make my day" - Dirty Harry //get

or silly:

I am not Mr. Lebowski. You're Mr. Lebowski

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As memorable as it sometimes is, dialog should function on several levels. It should:

- Reveal character
- Move the plot
- Accentuate 'setting' (think coptalk, surfer lingo, Valley girls, etc.)
- provide information
- Enhance tone
- Emphasize theme

It won't always cover all of these, but at its best, it does more than just one.

Dialogue should always be concise and written tighter than real speech. Remember that one of the better definitions of drama is "real life with all the boring stuff cut out."

This goes for both action—do we need to see the character go to the bathroom, brush teeth, make breakfast, etc.—and dialog. Because, just like spending time on showing routine but necessary events takes away from the thrust of the story, we won't always stay focused if dialog meanders the way we do in real life. I, for example, am appalled at how often I add in 'you know' to my speech. You know?

Unless there is a larger point, dialog should not repeat what we already know. People often do this in real life, but sometimes realistic is not exactly what we are after. The key is to find a balance between the clarity of a written exchange and the messy reality of the way people actually talk.

USING SUBTEXT

We often express ourselves in **subtext**. We don't always say exactly what we want or mean. I'm always reminded of this old joke:

https://openlab.bmcc.cuny.edu/screenwriting/wp-content/uploads/sites/97/2020/08/Bad-jokeConvert.mp3

"Can you pass the salt?" really means "You ruined my life," and the husband's lack of response to the explicitly stated subtext shows how and why.

As my Dad used to say about my Mom, anytime she said something was "fine", what she really meant was, "Oh, are you going to hear about this later."

Or take a look at this. What is going on with the subtext in this clip from *Sideways*?

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Sideways - Why Are You So Into Pinot

He’s not talking about wine; he is talking about himself.

Or take a look at this. So much going on in this clip from *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), written by Oscar-nominated Hanif Kureishi and directed by Stephen Frears. The challenges of being an openly gay Pakistani Briton in the 1980’s is vividly displayed in this scene in which the final line drips with subtext, i.e. all kinds of meaning below the surface. This clip directly confronts the typical Hollywood prohibitions on showing gay sex at that time while also never letting the viewer forget that what we are seeing on screen would be regarded as shocking by the main character’s father. Subtext in the way it’s shot and subtext in the dialogue.

Scene from My Beautiful Laundrette

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This scene from director Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* is even more dependent on subtext:

[Moonlight | Back Home | Official Clip HD | A24]

The subtext here is thicker than the words. Note how Barry Jenkins and Tarell Alvin McCraney define both the dialogue and the non-verbal reactions:

```
EXT. PAULA'S APT - DAY

Juan and Little standing on the porch of this closed
apartment, Juan's hand on Little's shoulder.

They're waiting, Juan looking through the curtains
there, no telling if anyone's inside or not. Is
raising his hand to knock once more, when...

                    VOICE (O.S.)
          What happened!?

Juan turning, sees a thin, exhausted (but attractive)
woman hurrying over.

This is PAULA (mid 20s, Little's mother). From the
looks of her uniform and a badge that reads "Paula
Harris," a nurse, just off the night shift. She goes
right to Little, pulls him into her arms, shields him
from Juan:

                    PAULA
          What happened Chiron? Why you didn't
          come home like you supposed to?!
```

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Nothing from Little, eyes cast down, afraid, ashamed. Paula looking up to Juan, finally gets a good look at him:

PAULA
And who is you?

Juan considering this, is oddly unsure how to respond, so...

JUAN
Nobody.
(and)
Found him yesterday. Found him in that hole over on 15th.

And at Paula's face dropping with recognition:

JUAN (CONTINUED)
Yeah. *That* one.

Paula lowering to her knees, eye-level with Little again, inspecting him:

JUAN
Wouldn't tell me where he stayed until this morning. Some boys chased him into the cut. Seemed scared more than anything.

Little embraces Paula, buries his face in her chest.

Paula holding on but looking past him, she and Juan holding eyes.

Paula rises, Little slipping behind her.

PAULA
Thanks for seeing to him. He usually can take care of hisself, he good that way, but...

Paula looking past her son, past this man, thoughts drifting off. From the looks of her, just a hardworking single mother in over her head.

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```
Juan's gaze lingering over her, clearly seeing the
same and yet... just a bit more.
```

Other times you might read a scene that you have already written and realize that the subtext of a certain exchange is giving you clues as to where the story needs to go.

ON THE NOSE DIALOGUE

When dialog says exactly what we think with no hesitation or subtlety, we call this **on the nose**.

People rarely speak like this. With that said, it is sometimes okay to write on the nose dialogue: In the moment of writing, you may want to just get it down rather than slow your momentum trying to couch it in thoughtful dialogue with subtext. But understand that you will want to go back and polish it later.

Dialog is the most common (although not only) way to deliver **backstory** and **exposition**. But it is important to be careful. A little goes a long way. A long and detailed exposition is one of the easiest ways to generate a disappointed eye roll from the audience:

For example:

> "What up? Last time we met you were puking tequila like a bulimic schoolgirl!"

reveals the speaker to be someone who likes to tease, is kind of a dick, and not particularly sensitive. It has a certain natural flow – we would expect a person of a certain age to say that, and it tells us that the addressee has a past of overindulging.

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The following, however, might be too much:

> "I haven't seen you since you got divorced, went to Mexico, got sick, caught sepsis, spent your savings on an airlift, lost your house, and moved back in with your parents. What's up?"

TALKING CHARACTER

The other rule of thumb is to avoid creating **characters who all speak alike**. This was a firm and hard rule of screenwriting but like most rules has been broken.

Aaron Sorkin (*The West Wing*, *The Social Networ*k, etc.) has every character speak identically—everyone is overeducated and verbally clever—but is very successful.

But generally speaking, a diversity of characters speaking in their own voice. In Bertha Pan's *Face*, notice how the characters all have a distinct way of communicating:

Face - Official Trailer

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WRITING NONFICTION FILM/DOCUMENTARY

Most people have an intuitive understanding of the difference between **fiction** and **nonfiction film**. Usually, we call anything based on footage of "reality" a "**documentary** film."

And yet when we drill down into exactly what that means, things get a little tricky. Perhaps a more cumbersome if nuanced definition will help. A non-fiction film can be:

- A film composed of footage of actual events, with or without narration
- A creative treatment of actual events
- A film with an absence of fictionalizing elements
- "Film which through certain conventions creates the illusion that the events depicted were not controlled by the filmmakers."

Most often, what we think of as "a documentary" is **a film that uses actual events to form into a narrative**. Under certain conditions, it may use **recreations**. So how does that make it different from a fictional narrative?

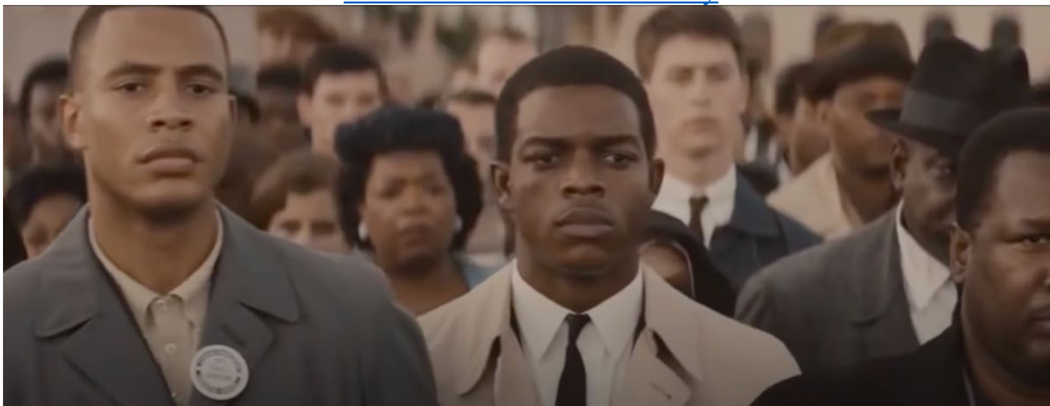
This commonly leads to the confusion between a **documentary** and a **docudrama**.

> A **documentary** is as described above.
>
> A **docudrama** takes actual events and **creates a fictional script** based on those events, and hires actors to play the people in the film.

Here are two clips from films that address the famous march on Selma.

One is a 2014 docudrama scripted by David Webb that stars many famous actors including Oprah Winfrey, David Oyelowo, and Common and directed by Ava DuVernay:

Selma - Turnaround Tuesday



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The other is a 2015 compilation called *Selma: The Real Selma Footage* that was edited together by Richard Morris from available sources:

Selma : The Real Selma Footage

The difference in presentation is stark—one "is" (at least for our purposes) composed of "reality"—**on camera footage of events that happened in the world**; the other **recreates it**.

The recreation is, appropriately, categorized as fiction because, unlike an eye-witness account or other document that conveys an undisputable authenticity, the actors and the actions are conceived for the camera.

Some completely staged docudramas, like Gilo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* or Paul Greengrass's *Bloody Sunday* and *Flight 93*, correspond closely enough to the documented events that they "feel" like documentaries. Some documentaries, like José Padilha and Felipe Lacerda's *Bus 174* or Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County USA*, are thrilling enough to be fiction.

The director Peter Bogdanovich, who has done both fiction and nonfiction films, has said that **fiction films are written first and shot later**, while **documentary films are shot first and written later**.

TYPES OF NONFICTION FOOTAGE

So a nonfiction film/documentary is very much **an assemblage of one or more kinds of footage**. Here are some of the various kinds of footage commonly used in documentaries:

Film/video:

- **Actions:** Footage of real-time events caught intentionally or unintentionally by on site cameras
- **Talking heads/Interviews:** These include those done "live" during an event and after-the-fact accounts, as well as all other forms of Q & As

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- **Archival/Historical/Library:** This includes news footage, newsreels, "accidental news footage," such as the Zapruder film of the JFK assassination or, more recently, Darnella Frazier's Pulitzer Prize-winning footage of the George Floyd murder, and still photos or even drawings/rendering of actual events

- **Stock:** Moving image illustrations of people, places, and things in action, such as "Kids playing softball" or "1990s New York City Skyline" or "Microscope POV of Amoeba")

- **Graphics/Animation:** Still photos, charts, graphs, explanatory or evidentiary drawings/renderings, key words, stylized titles, etc., as well as animations demonstrating/illuminating/positing actions or events

- **Reenactment**: This includes everything from **hyper-realistic presentations** that are meant to be seen as "real" to **hyper-unrealistic versions** that function as commentaries

Sound:

- Sync footage of people talking

- Non-sync on-camera voices (from interviews, on-site video and/or audio event footage)

- Voice over and Narration

- SFX (sound effects)

- Music

Look at the different kinds of footage used in these three documentaries:

1) Errol Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* (1988)

THE THIN BLUE LINE Trailer

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Notice (in order of appearance):
VIDEO: Reenactment(s), Archive documents, Archive photos, Titles, On Camera Interview(s), Stock photo(s), Graphics, Photos (taken for project), Stock footage
AUDIO: Music, Sound effect(s) (SFX), Sync interview audio, Non-sync Interview audio
Audio notice the voice over narration

2) Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* (1985)

[Sherman's March: Opening Scene]

Notice (in order of appearance):
VIDEO: Graphics, Animation, Archival photos, Live action (taken for project), Titles
AUDIO: Narration, Recording studio outtake audio, Voiceover(s)

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3) "Crip Camp" (2020) directed by James Lebrecht and Nicole Newnham
[Crip Camp | Clip | Like Woodstock]

Notice (in order of appearance):
VIDEO: Archival video, interviews, archival stills, lower third graphics, and subtitles for what is said & who is speaking
AUDIO: voice-overs, music

All are multiple prize-winning films, but notice how in *The Thin Blue Line*, Erroll Morris uses no narration at all, while in the *Sherman's March* clip, Ross McElwee begins with a traditional narrator, then pulls the rug out and uses a very different voiceover style. *Crip Camp* combines period music from the Woodstock era with voiceovers from the direct-to-camera interviews recorded 50 years later. The filmmakers discovered the footage shot during this remarkable summer camp and this allows us as viewers to be transported back in time to experience the freedom of this camp along with its young participants.

It is your choice; there isn't any one way that's "correct."

TURNING FACTS + IDEAS INTO SOUND + IMAGE

In creating a nonfiction/documentary short, there are many ways you can go. As with a fiction film, you want to start out thinking about **your goal** — do you want to **educate**, **entertain** or **(e)indoctrinate** (*almost* starts with an e).

A seminal book on nonfiction film, Bill Nichols' *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary,* (1991, Indiana University Press, Bloomington), documentary book breaks documentary down into the following categories:

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- Record/Reveal
- Analyze
- Persuade
- Express

In developing your nonfiction/documentary short you can decide which of the above you want to pursue—keeping in mind you can do more than one.

The key to an effective documentary short is finding a topic with an effective scope. You don't want it to be too broad. Hurricane Sandy would be too broad for a short, but how Hurricane Sandy affected the ancient oak trees in your particular section of Brooklyn could be amazing.

First, test your Documentary Idea(s):

- Is this an idea that might catch people's **interest**?
- Is the **scope** appropriate for a short?
- Is there an avenue of **research that you can handle** and pursue?
- Is there a **unique angle** you can bring to the topic?

Then, start to do some research on your topic. Perhaps it is the lovely rabbit.

You start off with the idea of simply recording the presence of rabbits in your neighborhood. A cute short documentary. When you subject this idea to the questions above, you find that the scope is doable and the collection of footage is relatively easy, but wonder who would be interested in more than a couple of minutes of cute rabbit footage and, apart from being set in a unique place—your neighborhood—what special expertise you're bringing to the topic.

You expand your point of view to **record/reveal** the way that rabbits are adaptable creatures who find a way to live (and live cute) in all kinds of unexpected places.

As you continue your research, you become fascinated by the way rabbits move. You dig deep in the physics of rabbit movement and decide that you will develop an analysis of the movement of rabbits. You get very detailed in the intricacies of rabbit locomotion.

When you subject this idea to the test questions, you find that, while the audience is limited, there are a surprising number of experts who can be interviewed in addition to a rich body of **analysis** that is easily translatable into interesting footage.

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You've also found that, when you speak with some locals, they are angry because the rabbits are upsetting the ecological balance of the area. All of the neighborhood gardens are falling apart. The community is up in arms. When you ask the questions now, the logical decision is to make a documentary to **persuade** the community to unite and demand that local officials do something.

As you start filming, you fall back in love with the rabbits. You decide it is all too much and you decide to make a documentary that **expresses** your sense of the pure beauty of a rabbit in motion. No information, no argument, no detailed analysis, just this natural beauty in motion, using footage that you shoot yourself in your neighborhood combined with other rabbit footage and images and set to a soundtrack that perfectly suits your vision.

Any one of these are valid choices and, when you're making your choice of what topic to pursue, you should go with the thing that engages you the most, whether it be popular or obscure. Passion really does triumph over playing it safe.

PREPARING YOUR DOCUMENTARY

In general, you go through the **same preliminary steps** for a nonfiction film as you do for a fiction film:

- **Log line** to determine the focus and direction
- **Step Outline** to work out the turns of narrative (aka "plot points),
- **Treatment** to lay out the moment to moment movement of the film/video.

The major difference is that, rather than **pulling each of the actions or points of conflict out of your imagination**, you'll be **pulling them from an established record** of an event in the world:

- A video of an event
- an interview with a participant in an event
- an explanatory graph
- a map
- a dictionary definition or other verifiable source.

B-ROLL – WHAT IT IS, WHAT IT DOES

Often these illustrative elements are called **B-roll**, which subsumes all of secondary footage intercut with the main footage (A-roll) which will usually be either action or interview footage. B-roll can be used to bolster the narrative or otherwise illustrate a point.

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The beginning of Orlando von Einsiedel's *Skateistan: To Live and Skate in Kabul* (2011) is all B-roll except for the footage of the protagonist, Fazilla, and his friend skating:

SKATEISTAN - To Live and Skate Kabul

It is important to plan for ways to cut away from the main footage—interviews, actions, etc.—as you are conceiving your project.

Skateistan combines footage of daily life in Kabul as background (B-roll) for the actual footage of his subject, the skater Fazilla (A-roll).

Ross McElwee (*Sherman's March*) had to meet the challenge of there being no footage at all of Sherman's 1864 March to the Sea, so he used a map and animation (B-roll) to get his point across before moving on to the new footage he had shot himself (A-roll).

Errol Morris uses staged reenactments of the murder as both A-roll and B-roll in *The Thin Blue Line.* Sometimes they are the main focus, functioning as action footage, at others they are cutaway illustrations of something being said in an interview.

If you are working primarily from a published nonfiction article, your professor will have guidelines on how to repurpose that information for an A/V-based narrative project.

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DOCUMENTS USED IN NONFICTION/DOCUMENTARY FILM

One of the beauties (and challenges) of nonfiction/documentary films is that they can be done on almost any topic and in a wider range of styles than is common for short fiction narratives.

So work through in your mind what you want to show people and how to best present it in an exclusively audio-visual medium.

Given that what you see and hear may come from different sources, documentaries (and some television) use a completely different format for the script: **The Two Column or A/V Script**.

This form makes it easier to distinguish between the sound and image of the piece. It is as simple as it sounds. Audio in one column, Image in the other.

DISSOLVE TO: STOCK FOOTAGE - SCRATCH OFF TICKETS PRINTING PRESS Scratch off style tickets being spit out of a printing press as WORKERS observe and organize the sheets for binding.	MUSIC CONT. NARRATOR: Like most state lotteries, the Texas Lottery divides its print run into batches, or pools.
CUT TO: ANIMATION - TEXAS STATE MAP - STAR INDICATES AUSTIN ARROWS SPRING FROM AUSTIN INTO LINES THAT LEAD TO THE BIG CITIES, THEN BRANCH INTO SMALLER AND SMALLER TOWNS TILL THE MAP LOOKS LIKE A DIAGRAM OF THE HUMAN CIRCULATORY SYSTEM.	MUSIC CONT. NARRATOR: Each pool of half a million tickets contains one sixth of the prize money. When a game goes on sale, the first pool is shipped off to stores. Successive pools aren't released until the preceding one is close to selling out. This system guarantees that the lottery never loses.
CUT TO: INT. DALLAS HOME - GARAGE - DAY In a garage with an office size printer/copier and lots of document boxes. DAWN NETTLES (60s, business casual dress) looks into the hopper where the stapled copies are being spit out.	MUSIC CONT. INT. DALLAS HOME - GARAGE - AMBIENCE NARRATOR: Dawn Nettles, who lives in Dallas, has published her Lotto Report twice a week since 1993. It keeps track of every winner of Lotto Texas, Cash Five, Pick 3, Daily 4, Texas Two Step and the nearly 1,400 scratch-off games that have been issued by the Lottery.

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CUT TO: INT. DALLAS HOME - GARAGE - DAY Copies coming out of the copier DAWN NETTLES: Every time there's a big, high-dollar ticket out there, with a big, high-dollar prize, one jackpot comes in real fast. But the other two don't come in until the game's almost over.	MUSIC CONT. INT. DALLAS HOME - GARAGE – AMBIENCE DAWN NETTLES: Every time there's a big, high-dollar ticket out there, with a big, high-dollar prize, one jackpot comes in real fast. But the other two don't come in until the game's almost over.
DISSOLVE TO: STOCK FOOTAGE - SCRATCH OFF TICKETS PRINTING PRESS Scratch off style tickets being spit out of a printing press as WORKERS observe and organize the sheets for binding.	MUSIC CONT. INT. DALLAS HOME - GARAGE - AMBIENCE NARRATOR: Like most state lotteries, the Texas Lottery divides its print run into batches, or pools.
CUT TO: INT. DALLAS HOME - GARAGE - DAY Nettles holds up a copy of the LOTTO REPORT from 2006 and points to the date of the issue, then opens to a page labeled "FIRST JACKPOT" Nettles then picks up another 2006 LOTTO REPORT, open to a page labeled "JOAN'S JACKPOT" and points to the later date. Nettles then holds up two fanned issues of the LOTTO REPORT from 2008. Nettles hold two fanned issues of the LOTTO REPORT from 2010 and shakes her head	MUSIC CONT. INT. DALLAS HOME - GARAGE - AMBIENCE CONT. NARRATOR: In Ginther's 2006 win, the first jackpot came out early in the print run. And Ginther claimed the second jackpot more than halfway through the run. This happened again in 2008… ...and 2010. Coincidence? Odds are, no way.

The other difference is that a Nonfiction/Documentary Project will require a **Synopsis of Sources and Methods** in addition to the Treatment. This will go after the Log Line and before the Treatment and sum up where and sometimes how you got the material and how you're going to use it.

For example:

> **Synopsis of Sources and Methods**
> [Title of Documentary] will show the unique and incredibly varied and elegant movements of the common rabbit using footage shot for this documentary, archive footage, photos and artwork, interviews with experts on animal movement, veterinarians, artists, and rabbit enthusiasts [name them if you like]. It will also incorporate music, sound effects, and voiceover

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narration to paint a full portrait of a creature that most of us are barely aware of but that is around us in surprising numbers.

Treatment: The adventures of the lovely rabbit begin...etc.

The next section shows a complete project that meets the guidelines for a Nonfiction Project.

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A/V SCRIPT OF FIRST FEW MINUTES:

[NOTE: A/V IS LONGER THAN NECESSARY, BUT INCLUDES DEMONSTRATIONS OF SEVEARL DIFFERENT TECHNIQUES]

Video	Audio
BLACK SCREEN	MUSIC UP NARRATOR: Joan Ginther is a lucky woman:
FADE IN: GRFX: NEWSPAPER ARTICLE (1993): Woman wins $5M in Pick 6	MUSIC CONT. NARRATOR: She won the lottery. Not only that…
DISSOLVE TO: GRFX: NEWSPAPER ARTICLE (2006): Woman wins $2M in Texas Scratch-off	MUSIC CONT. NARRATOR:…she did it again…
DISSOLVE TO: GRFX: NEWSPAPER ARTICLE (2008): Woman wins $3M in Texas Scratch-off	MUSIC CONT. NARRATOR:… and again…
DISSOLVE TO: ARCHIVE FOOTAGE (2010): Four-time Lottery Queen wins $10M	MUSIC CONT. NARRATOR: :... and again.
FADE TO BLACK FADE UP: [Numerals] 1 in 18 FADE UP one [0] every half second for 12 seconds until we see: 1 in 18,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000	MUSIC CONT. NARRATOR: What're the odds? Actually, the AP interviewed mathematicians who figured they were one in eighteen septillion. How big a number is that? There are… Wait for it, Wait for it, Twenty four zeroes. For reference, there are:
DISSOLVE TO: EXT. JONES BEACH SEEN FROM ABOVE – DAY	MUSIC CONT. NARRATOR: One septillion grains of sand…
FAST ZOOM OUT TO: IMAGE OF THE WHOLE EARTH FROM SPACE	MUSIC CONT. NARRATOR: …on earth. Or one septillion…
FAST ZOOM OUT TO: HUBBLE TELESCOPE IMAGE OF THE MILKY WAY	MUSIC CONT. NARRATOR:..stars in the…
FAST ZOOM OUT TO: HUBBLE TELESCOPE IMAGE OF DEEP SPACE WITH RANDOM WIDELY SPACED GALAXIES	MUSIC CONT. NARRATOR:…Universe. Other experts have a different idea of the odds:
CUT TO: INT. UNV/RENO OFFICE – DAY PROF. NAME sits at her desk.	MUSIC OUT INT. UNV/RENO OFFICE – AMBIENCE

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<table>
<tr><td>LOWER THIRD: Prof. Name
Institute for the Study of Gambling and Commercial Gaming
University of Nevada at Reno
PROF. NAME: When something this unlikely happens in a casino, you arrest ‘em first and ask questions later.</td><td>PROF. NAME: When something this unlikely happens in a casino, you arrest ‘em first and ask questions later.</td></tr>
<tr><td>CUT TO:
INT. CAESAR’S SURVEILLANCE MODULE – DAY
NAMEY NAME, wearing sunglasses, looks out the one-way glass onto the gaming table
LOWER THIRD: Namey Name
Casino Surveillance Expert
NAMEY NAME: She must have had some kind of scam working. They need to lock her up.</td><td>INT. CAESAR’S SURVEILLANCE MODULE – AMBIENCE

NAMEY NAME: She must have had some kind of scam working. They need to lock her up.</td></tr>
<tr><td>CUT TO:
INT. STATE LOTTERY DIRECTOR’S OFFICE - DAY
Well-appointed corporate office.
LOTTERY DIRECTOR NAME NAMESON (male, 50s, corporate attire) sits at his desk.
Nameson reacts, then:
NAMESON: You can bet on two things: One, they’re doing a serious investigation. Two, they ain’t going to let anyone find out about it.</td><td>INT. STATE LOTTERY DIRECTOR’S OFFICE - AMBIENCE

INTERVIEWER (O.S.): The Texas State Lottery announcement said that there was “no suspicion of foul play” in the Ginther case.

NAMESON: You can bet on two things: One, they’re doing a serious investigation. Two, they ain’t going to let anyone find out about it.</td></tr>
<tr><td>FADE TO BLACK</td><td>NARRATOR: So the fix was in, but what fix? Scratch-off Lottery tickets are statistically most vulnerable to fraud...</td></tr>
<tr><td>FADE IN:
INT. BODEGA – DAY (SURVEILLANCE CAM)
A CLERK (Male, 30s, T-shirt and jeans) is at the register, which is next to a Lottery machine.

A CUSTOMER (Male, 30s, dressed like one of the track-suited guys from Donnie Brasco) comes up to the register.</td><td>SEGUE TO:
INT. BODEGA – AMBIENCE (STATIC-Y)
NARRATOR: ...but the most common is the Retailer Scam.

[SOUND OF SPOKEN WORDS ARE ECHO-Y AND STATIC-Y DUE TO SURVEILLANCE CAM MICROPHONE]</td></tr>
</table>

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CUSTOMER [ALL SPOKEN WORDS ARE SUBTITLED]: Dude, I think I won! Customer holds out a lottery ticket. Clerk takes it and looks at it closely, then punches up a number on the Lottery machine and looks at that closely. CLERK: Nah, sorry, man, it's close but not a winner. CUSTOMER: Seriously? [BLEEP]. I thought it was. The Customer walks away and the Clerk pockets the ticket.	CUSTOMER: Dude, I think I won! CLERK: Nah, sorry, man, it's close but not a winner. CUSTOMER: Seriously? [BLEEP]. I thought it was. NARRATOR: Watch what the Clerk does here.
CUT TO: EXT. LOTTERY HQ – DAY (REENACTMENT) A MAN DRESSED LIKE THE CLERK walks into Lottery headquarters .	EXT. LOTTERY HQ – AMBIENCE NARRATOR: The next day the Clerk went to Lottery Headquarters to claim the prize. Unfortunately for the Clerk...
DISSOLVE TO: GRFX: MUG SHOT OF CLERK	NARRATOR: … the Customer was an undercover cop.
CUT TO: EXT. LOTTERY HQ – DAY (REENACTMENT) A MAN DRESSED LIKE THE CLERK is walked out of the building in handcuffs by two POLICE OFFICERS.	SFX*: Law & Order* KA-KUNG sting NARRATOR: And convicted for the theft.
DISSOLVE TO: GRFX: NEWSPAPER ARTICLE (2006): Woman wins $2M in Texas Scratch-off	MUSIC UP NARRATOR: Too simple ...
FAST DISSOLVE TO: GRFX: NEWSPAPER ARTICLE (2008): Woman wins $3M in Texas Scratch-off	MUSIC CONT. NARRATOR: ...to explain...
FAST DISSOLVE TO: GRFX: NEWSPAPER ARTICLE (2010): Woman wins $10M in Texas Scratch-off	MUSIC CONT. NARRATOR: ...Ginther's repeat jackpots
DISSOLVE TO:	MUSIC CONT.

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STOCK FOOTAGE - SCRATCH OFF TICKETS PRINTING PRESS Scratch off style tickets being spit out of a printing press as WORKERS observe and organize the sheets for binding.	NARRATOR: Like most state lotteries, the Texas Lottery divides its print run into batches, or pools.
CUT TO: ANIMATION - TEXAS STATE MAP - STAR INDICATES AUSTIN ARROWS SPRING FROM AUSTIN INTO LINES THAT LEAD TO THE BIG CITIES, THEN BRANCH INTO SMALLER AND SMALLER TOWNS TILL THE MAP LOOKS LIKE A DIAGRAM OF THE HUMAN CIRCULATORY SYSTEM.	MUSIC CONT. NARRATOR: Each pool of half a million tickets contains one sixth of the prize money. When a game goes on sale, the first pool is shipped off to stores. Successive pools aren't released until the preceding one is close to selling out. This system guarantees that the lottery never loses.
CUT TO: INT. DALLAS HOME - GARAGE - DAY In a garage with an office size printer/copier and lots of document boxes. DAWN NETTLES (60s, business casual dress) looks into the hopper where the stapled copies are being spit out.	MUSIC CONT. INT. DALLAS HOME - GARAGE - AMBIENCE NARRATOR: Dawn Nettles, who lives in Dallas, has published her Lotto Report twice a week since 1993. It keeps track of every winner of Lotto Texas, Cash Five, Pick 3, Daily 4, Texas Two Step and the nearly 1,400 scratch-off games that have been issued by the Lottery.
CUT TO: INT. DALLAS HOME - GARAGE - DAY DAWN NETTLES: Every time there's a big, high-dollar ticket out there, with a big, high-dollar prize, one jackpot comes in real fast. But the other two don't come in until the game's almost over.	MUSIC CONT. INT. DALLAS HOME - GARAGE - AMBIENCE DAWN NETTLES: Every time there's a big, high-dollar ticket out there, with a big, high-dollar prize, one jackpot comes in real fast. But the other two don't come in until the game's almost over.
DISSOLVE TO: STOCK FOOTAGE - SCRATCH OFF TICKETS PRINTING PRESS Scratch off style tickets being spit out of a printing press as WORKERS observe and organize the sheets for binding.	MUSIC CONT. INT. DALLAS HOME - GARAGE - AMBIENCE NARRATOR: Like most state lotteries, the Texas Lottery divides its print run into batches, or pools.
CUT TO: INT. DALLAS HOME - GARAGE - DAY	MUSIC CONT. INT. DALLAS HOME - GARAGE - AMBIENCE CONT.

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Nettles holds up a copy of the LOTTO REPORT from 2006 and points to the date of the issue, then opens to a page labeled “FIRST JACKPOT” Nettles then picks up another 2006 LOTTO REPORT, open to a page labeled “JOAN’S JACKPOT” and points to the later date. Nettles then holds up two fanned issues of the LOTTO REPORT from 2008. Nettles hold two fanned issues of the LOTTO REPORT from 2010 and shakes her head	NARRATOR: In Ginther’s 2006 win, the first jackpot came out early in the print run. And Ginther claimed the second jackpot more than halfway through the run. This happened again in 2008… ...and 2010. Coincidence? Odds are, no way.

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REVISION

Writing is rewriting!!!

Remember that story about the Stallone movie *Lock Up*, that was allegedly written by someone who locked themselves in a room for a weekend?

Well, the follow up is that the script was rewritten several times before it became the film that it was. So, yes you can go on a spree and get something done, but expect to revise and rework it.

Revising your screenplay is an essential part of the process. It is an old saw for writers of just about anything that **writing is rewriting**. But don't take my word for it, listen to Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk.

Orhan Pamuk: The Secret to Writing is Rewriting | Big Think

And it is an old saw for a reason. Not even the most experienced and professional writers know what is really on the page until someone else reads it and tells them.

GETTING FEEDBACK

The proof of the writing is literally in the reading: Does the person looking at the words get the same (or close enough to the same) meaning as the writer intended?

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Feedback should be designed to empower the writer who is sharing their work. The intention is to hone in on the impact of the piece on the reader and to leave the writer motivated to continue deepening the material.

Because scriptwriters are dealing *exclusively* with time-based events meant to appear on a two-dimensional screen enhanced by audio elements, someone else reading your script often reveals that:

1. You are not dealing exclusively with such elements;

2. You aren't being clear enough in your descriptions of places and events for a reader to "see" them; and

3. You have left something out that you know but the reader doesn't.

Experienced writers tend to overcompensate for this and write first drafts that are overly detailed -- their primary revisions will be to "lean out" the script and focus on how rather than if the full story is being told.

First time scriptwriters, especially those who have mostly read or written prose fiction, tend to try to use that medium's tools (nuance, shading, ambiguity) in a medium that is, at its core, utterly concrete and literal.

This doesn't mean you can't write about things that don't exist in the real world, just that you have to describe them as occurring in a visual context.

The *Harry Potter* movies, *Game of Thrones* and the Marvel Universe all take place in imaginary realms, but, on screen, their reality is just as literal as *The Real Housewives*.

UNDERSTANDING FEEDBACK

So once you're satisfied with a draft, and have gone back to some of the crucial questions you asked yourself to see if the answers you had prior to writing are reflected in your actual writing, have someone else read it.

In class, that is easy. But outside of class find anyone willing to give it an honest read.

If they are not in the profession (and often if they are), you will need to be a detective. There is subtext in them thar comments.

Folks can't always accurately articulate the problem. Don't fight what they say; listen with both ears and see if they are using a roundabout way of addressing something else.

Perhaps you have a protagonist who walks into a bar and kicks-ass on five bikers without spilling their drink.

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A friend reads it and says the protagonist doesn't seem tough.

You are thinking—they just walloped a biker gang!

But perhaps what the reader is saying is that they don't connect to the protagonist. There is not a moment of empathy, so the ass kicking didn't resonate.

Sometimes feedback may not be on the mark. You can't please everyone. But do NOT use that as an excuse to ignore feedback. Again, pay attention to subtext and to any gap between what you wanted the reader to take away and what they actually took away.

Some common items to check for:

- Did you articulate and address the **central conflict**? There is a certain tendency to avoid conflict. Does your script have conflict that moves the story forward?

- Do you have the same conflict repeating? Conflict should ideally escalate.

```
                    CHARACTER A
        Please give me your phone.

                    CHARACTER B
        No.

                    CHARACTER A
        Please give me your phone.

                    CHARACTER B
        No.
```

There is no real escalation here. But with a little emendation:

```
                    CHARACTER A
        Please give me your phone.

                    CHARACTER B
        No.

    Character A Moves up into B's face.
```

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```
                    CHARACTER A
          I said give me the phone.

      Character B pushes Character A away.

     Character A snatches the phone.

                    CHARACTER B
          Piss off!

     Character A Lunges after Character B.

                    CHARACTER A
          I'll tell your wife if you don't
          give me your phone back!
```

Notice in the first one there is no escalation but in the second the stakes are raised until one character is faced with a dilemma.

Or watch this clip from Robert Townsend's *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987):

[Hollywood Shuffle - Can you act more black?]

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There are two conflicts going on here.

The conflict *in* the movie they are making which has no escalation: *You killed my friend, so what what are you going to do, what are you going to do.*

Then there is the escalating conflict of Bobby the actor being asked to play a flat, stereotypical character.

Notice how that conflict escalates without words. Through the power of cinema (as the clip cuts between Bobby and a mentor, between Bobby and the child who looks up to him), that conflict escalates to the point where Bobby *has* to quit.

- Inexperienced writers will often simply lengthen the first draft rather than focus or tighten it. Based on your own notes or feedback you will simply add items instead of digging in to find what's not working so you can rework the scene(s).

  This strategy will often work counter to your goals. More can be necessary, but sometimes more is not always better.

- Which brings us to another question: Is there something that can be condensed into a montage?

  While traditionally thought of as a series of shots set over music that condenses time (see every makeover/new skill training/falling in love sequence-turned-music-video *ever*), **a montage can show an interval where there is growth or change but little conflict**.

  Let's allow our friends from South Park to explain it:

Team america montage

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This gripping montage in Bong Joon Ho's *Parasite* moves from plan to fruition with speed and intensity. The montage creates tension where there is little conflict, the plan is an overwhelming success.

Parasite (2019) - Peach Fuzz Ploy Scene

You will often see this with love stories when the couple is happy. It is important to emphasize but can get boring with no conflict, so montage….

Dirty Dancing "Hungry Eyes" Dance Scene.

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There are a couple of ways to construct a montage.

One is for a **series of shots all set in one scene** (*Dirty Dancing*):

```
INT. JOHN'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

John nervously tries out different disguises, checking Rufus
for approval.

MONTAGE

- John as a Pirate.

- John in a Space suit.

- John in a Cowboy outfit.

- John in a baby blue tuxedo.

BACK TO SCENE

John appears wearing a trench coat and black fedora.

                    RUFUS
          I think that draws the least
          attention.
```

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and the other is a **series of different scenes** (*Parasite*):

```
INT. JOHN'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

John looks into his closet, turns to Rufus and shakes his
head.

                    JOHN
          I'm going to need a new outfit.


MONTAGE - VARIOUS

A) EXT. PIRATE SHIP - DAY - John dressed as a Pirate manning
the helm of the ship.

B) INT. AIR & SPACE MUSEUM - DAY - John in a space suit
mimicking a space walk.

C) EXT. RANCH - DAY - John wearing a cowboy outfit, throws a
lasso onto Rufus.

D) INT. TUXEDO SHOP - DAY - John steps out of the dressing
room in a baby blue tuxedo and performs a quick tap dancing
routine.

END OF MONTAGE


INT. JOHN'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

John adjusts the trench coat and black fedora he is wearing.
```

FINAL THOUGHTS

Keep revising until you feel like everything's exactly what it should be AND that your readers are taking away the *same* "exactly what it should be."

Let the feedback you get help you figure out what isn't working and magnify what is working.

Get to work!

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