Writing Short Film Scripts

A Student Guide to Film-making

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A Note for Teachers

What
Writing Short Film Scripts – A Student Guide to Film-making is designed to:

a) help students learn the basics of writing and producing a short film, including how to get started; writing the short film as a screenplay; storyboarding the screenplay; and shooting, editing and screening the short film for an audience

b) examine where ideas come from, what makes a ‘good idea’ for a film, how to structure the story, and provide students with a step-by-step instructional guide to write and create their own short films

c) provide exercises and stimulus to assist students in developing their ideas, forming teams and making their films

d) direct students to relevant websites and resources to help them write and produce their films, and explore the general art and industry of film-making.

Why
The book is invaluable for secondary school teachers and their students in the areas of Media, Drama and English as it is:

a) relevant, focusing on aspects of the curriculum in the areas of media, production, teamwork, communication, creative writing and expression

b) comprehensive in its information on all areas of screenwriting and the steps involved in writing and making a short film

c) easy to navigate, making it possible to locate material on all areas of the subject quickly and efficiently

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d) practical, providing examples, activities, quotes, definitions and web references for teachers to use in class.

**How**
The book is divided into seven chapters, based on an inverted pyramid style of film creation and production and the seven Ss.
1. SCRIPT
Focusing on story, dialogue, formatting, character, plot, theme, momentum and the document itself.

2. SUPPORT
The Seven Ss of Film-making
Focusing on the film-making team – producer, director, cast, crew, and their roles and responsibilities.

3. STORYBOARD
Focusing on how to turn the script into a series of pictures and images able to be filmed.

4. STRUCTURE
Focusing on structuring and synchronising all aspects of the film before it is shot, such as the design, locations, make-up, hair, catering and any specific requirements of the film.

5. SHOOT
Focusing on the shoot itself, things to consider and be aware of.

6. SHAPE
Focusing on the post-production stage including the editing, music, sound effects and pick-up shots required.

7. SCREEN
Focusing on putting your film in front of an audience and using it as a ‘calling card’ to get into the industry.
FILMS ARE A SERIES of pictures or images that tell a story communicating an idea about the world. A film script, or document (regardless of the length), containing dialogue and directions that actors, designers, directors and producers use to make a film, is called a screenplay.

Myth buster

Is it possible to make a film without a screenplay? Yes, definitely. Many short films are developed, produced and screened without using any kind of written document. Even some feature films have been produced without a script, relying on the characters improvising (making stuff up on the spot) and leaving the camera rolling so the editor, after everything’s been filmed, can edit together ‘the best bits’.

Is it advisable to make a film without a screenplay? Definitely not! Why not? For many reasons:

1. Number of people involved
   Because so many people can be involved in the making of a film (actors, director, producers, and potentially countless others), it is crucial everyone
understands the goal trying to be achieved – who the characters are, the locations required, what they should look like, props, costumes, lighting and so on.

2. **Ideas can change**
   If the writer or director changes their mind about the film, the best way to communicate these changes is via the script, which is then redistributed to all involved.

3. **Others want to contribute**
   A written document allows the story, plot, characters, dialogue and all ideas contained in the script to be honed, clarified, improved and reconsidered for the sake of making a better film, without shooting it first only to find out later that some early discussion and rewrites would have been useful.

4. **Money and resources**
   Even student films cost time, money and resources, whether it’s using class time, a school camera, someone’s house or a particular location. Cast, crew, producers and everyone else involved will be more inclined to give their time if there is a blueprint document the director is following and everyone knows what’s being filmed and (roughly) how long it will take.

5. **Audience expectations**
   To be kept engaged or interested, audiences generally expect a good story, a character pursuing a goal, a beginning, middle and an end. These sorts of story elements can be improved in the process of writing a script. They are harder to refine and improve without writing them down and knowing scene by scene, how the story unfolds.

So, we agree. To make a film, we need a screenplay. But how do you write one and what if you can’t think of anything?

**Myth buster**
What if I’m not a writer? Every writer thinks that at some point, even the most professional writers, even writers who have won awards and had their films produced.
The truth is that ANYONE CAN WRITE. Yes, writing can be hard, whether you’re a new writer or have years of experience. The difference is that new writers (or people who say they can’t write) use it as an excuse to stop, or never get started. Experienced writers know writing is hard, but write anyway, whether or not they are in the mood. Yes, there may be people who are naturally better at telling a story, but don’t let it stop you writing.

If you want to write, you can learn the craft. Your ability to tell a story will improve with persistence and dedication. Reading this book is a great start.

If you are struggling to write something, be patient. It is common for writers to spend time simply staring at a blank page. The answer might come when you least expect it. If you’re worried about getting it wrong, don’t! Failing is learning and the sooner you mess it up, the sooner you can fix it and get it right.

Writing a screenplay is like doing a jigsaw puzzle. There are many bits to fit together; the puzzle won’t be complete if all the bits aren’t included and placed exactly where they need to be.

What makes a ‘good’ screenplay? A good script essentially refers to one that entertains an audience or makes an audience respond or feel the way you want them to.

Where do you start? An idea for a script or short film can come from anywhere – a news story you read or heard, a person you know who you think would make a great character, an adaptation of a fairy tale or something you heard on a bus or at school.

There are several websites on how to write and make a short film. Here are a few to inspire you and get you started: http://www.wikihow.com/Make-a-Short-Film or http://www.digitalfilmcrew.com/2007/09/18/how-to-make-a-short-film-for-tropfest/ or http://www.wheresthedrama.com. You can also google ‘how to make a short film’ and see what comes up.

What makes a good idea for a film? Firstly, drama is about conflict, so ‘good’ ideas for short films are those that can sustain conflict throughout. ‘Someone refusing to do the dishes’ in itself is not enough. But if
that action was the last straw between two siblings and triggered the destruction of their relationship, the conflict might keep an audience interested for the length of a short film.

**Films are about a central dramatic question**

Central dramatic questions are always in terms of your main character and must last the entire film. As soon as the question is answered, the film is often over.

- Will Harry and Sally ever be more than friends?

Short films also require a dramatic question, even if the film is only a few minutes long. For example:

- A tennis star’s hands are damaged in an accident. Will she ever play tennis again?
- A student wants to cheat in an exam. Will he get away with it?
- A young boy has a fight with his best friend. Will they resolve it?

**Subject matter – getting started**

A good way to start is by choosing a subject you’re interested in or an experience you’ve had. Try the following steps to get you thinking:

- Write down all your interests or passions, in any order.
- Group your interests together to find a pattern or link between them.
- Select the thing or subject you are most passionate about and consider something you want to express on that idea; for example, a thought, message or opinion you want to convey to a reader or an audience.
- Write some possible thoughts for messages or opinions underneath the actual subject or area of interest.

Some ideas to get you started:

- a holiday you’ve been on (*message – there’s no place like home*)
- a childhood memory (*sometimes one must let go of the past to move on*)
- the day you kidnapped a celebrity (*fame isn’t all it’s cracked up to be*)

Other triggers for ideas might be:

- something in your bedroom that holds a magic power