

# HOW TO WRITE A SCREENPLAY

*A GUIDE FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS*

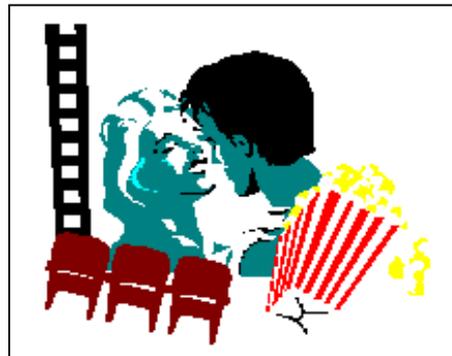
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For National Writers Workshop

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## **Screenwriting, The Golden Road To Adventure.**

Writing a screenplay is like no other adventure! You, the writer, get to experience other characters and their way of looking at things. Telling stories is not only fun, you get to share something you know about life. Short stories are often used by film students for production projects. Selling a produced screenplay could earn in multiples of \$20,000.00. Imagine the thrill of someday seeing your stories on the screen and bumping elbows with famous people.<sup>1</sup> So if you're ready for a really good time, sharpen your pencil and I will try to get you on your way. Following the Index is a *Quick Start Summary* sure to get you off to a quick and easy start.

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<sup>1</sup>All writing careers are very competitive and often require years of experience to establish a career.

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## Quick Start Summary

Use this summary to start creating your screenplay right away. Then use it for a handy reference to detailed information as you write. Have a great time and good luck!

**What To Write:** Write about what interests you. It will be more fun and it will probably interest others. Unusual things and surprises really get attention (but not too radical). If the outcome of the story is predictable, I can predict a lullaby rating. Humor can be a helpful element in any story, but too much humor spoils it.

One page equals about one minute of screen time, so shoot for ten to thirty pages, which is typically about three to twelve scenes. **Hint:** it's easier to write thirty pages than ten because shorter stories require more intensity. *More info: p8.*

**What To Wear:** Loose fitting clothes with large vegetable patterns. Just kidding!

**Writing Methods:** Use the method best suited to you—just get started. At some early point you should write out the plot or story line so you don't waste ten erasers. *More info: p8.*

**Characterization:** Creating characters who have real wants and needs is a great place to start. Often the best stories come straight from the characters. Create your main character and an opposing character, then a couple of friends. Throw them together in a situation where they're struggling for something they want, and there it is: the story writes itself. *More info: p9.*

**Dramatic Structure:** Stories have three acts... exciting acts! Act I grabs our attention like cool drinks on a hot beach, main characters dazzle us with their entrances, and a problem we're dying to see solved, develops into a big crisis: somebody wants something they can't have! Like to get all their projects completed by semester end, that's tomorrow, and they haven't even started yet!

The crisis launches us into Act II, which will be about fifty percent of the story. There the main character struggles to get his prize, but the problems get bigger and bigger, draining his strength, destroying his will, until beaten and broken he must do the impossible—get an A on a calculus test during the basketball playoffs or he flunks—which moves the story into Act III.

In Act III we're hanging on the edge of our seats! Will he win this final battle and get his rock collection gathered from eighty city blocks (where his angry girl friend dumped them), and ace the calculus test, or will his search for earthy spectacles be his doom? He succeeds, of course, and the story is resolved. Easy, isn't it? The dramatic structure of a sample story line, *Prom Date*, is explained on *p4*.

**The Plot:** What is going to happen in your story? The basic plot is the main source of conflict, which creates tension. Plots have to have conflict to keep our interest. Tension comes from the main characters opposing each other or striving for something. Then all the details that drive the story this way and that make up the full plot. Writing the full story without knowing the plot, is a gamble that everything will work, and frequently it doesn't. *More info: p10.*

**The Scene:** The fundamental building block of screenplays. It lasts an average of three minutes and takes place in one location. When the location or time changes, it is a new scene. Think of scenes as situations that are like a mini story. *More info: p12.*

**Dialogue:** Dialogue is what people say: their exact words without “quotation marks” or *he said, she felt, she remembered*, etc. Each line of dialogue should be as short as possible—don’t talk to us like you talk to your friends. *More info: p14.*

**Set-ups For Short Scripts:** Ten to twenty page short scripts make special demands on character and plot. Make it easier on yourself—*read about this on p16.*

**Format:** Screenplays follow an easy format; and if they’re not in it, no one will read it. *See p17. See the example on p19.*

**Rewriting:** The best kept secret in Hollywood. See p20

**Beware!** Some mistakes will earn you the title of *amateur*. Avoid these things and you’ll look good on paper. *More info: p21.*

**Getting Feedback:** The best thing to do is talk to others about your story and get their input (unless you’re very sensitive). Ask others what they would do in a situation similar to your character’s. *Not an expanded topic.*

**Stolen Property Statement:** Major studios are honest and million dollar lawsuits discourage the dishonest from plagiarizing stories. But chances are, if you have an idea, you will see something like it within the next three years. *See why: p15.*

**Teacher’s Information:** Students may safely skip this part unless they are afraid the teacher is learning secrets they should know. *p23.*

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If you found the way this material was presented was helpful (or you hated it), please drop me a line in care of Writers Workshop. Your feedback will help me prepare future resources. Please don’t send stories, summaries or ideas. - Scott

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## **Dramatic Structure With Prom Date Illustration**

Every story has three parts. This is called the three act structure. Stories develop better if you have the three act structure in the back of your head. Let’s use, as an example, a story of personal triumph.

### **PROM DATE** *Sample Story Synopsis*

Act I: Shaun’s sister Elizabeth teases him because he doesn’t have a prom date. He wishes he could get a date with Laura for the prom. Shaun and his best friend Tim see Laura ride away with a bunch of girls, waving to Dave the Geek. Shaun won’t associate with geeks and wonders what Laura could possibly see in him.

Shaun is shy. He asks his best friend Tim to fix him up with Laura. Tim pretends to ask Laura to date Shaun, but instead he tells Laura lies about Shaun. Laura is sorry to hear the negative stories—she likes Shaun. She thanks Tim for being such a friend.

Shaun and Tim are preparing for an experimental model plane match. Shaun can’t get his model plane wings the right size so it will fly, but Tim’s will. Discouraged, Shaun decides that the prom is the only meaningful event for the entire year. He is going to finish the year by getting a date with Laura.

Act II: Shaun tries three times to impress Laura and ask her for the date, each time making himself look totally ridiculous. Dave the Geek is always in the way. Shaun becomes convinced Dave is his rival and tries to outdo him in math class. Dave buries him. Tim tries to convince Shaun that Laura is out of his league and that trying to get a date with her is hopeless. Shaun shows up at her door one afternoon in his old car. He tries again to ask for a date and she humors him. Before Shaun finishes, a wealthy college guy, Colin, shows up in a cool new car and leaves with Laura. Shaun learns that Laura is now dating this guy, destroying Shaun's hopes. But Tim knows Colin is secretly seeing someone else, is using Laura, and is going to dump her just before the prom. Tim expects to catch her on the rebound.

Shaun is stuck on a math problem that would help him correct the lift ratio on his experimental model plane. He gets stuck waiting with Dave in a car in the rain at a ball game. He can hardly bring himself to ask Dave for help, but finally does, and they start to work on the math problem. Shaun asks how serious he and Laura were. Dave reveals he had no interest in Laura, he was just tutoring her in math—Dave's girl friend goes to a private school. He asks Dave how to talk to Laura. He says, "Just like you talk to me, like a person." Then Dave tells him a secret: Colin's real girl friend also goes to the private school, and Colin is dating Laura to make his real girl friend jealous.

Act III: Shaun races to Laura's home, but Colin's car is parked in the drive. Shaun circles the block, working up courage, then goes to see Laura. He asks Colin when he is going to stop seeing this other girl. Colin angrily goes to his car, spouting the same lies Tim had told Laura. Shaun denies them. Shaun asks her to the prom. She says, "Yes."

Prom night, Laura tells Shaun that Tim had said all those things about him, and that Tim and Colin are friends. Shaun confronts Tim with the lies on the dance floor, and Tim leaves. The next day at the model plane match, Shaun's and Tim's planes compete. Shaun's wins the match. Shaun leaves with Laura, Dave, and the trophy.

#### *Analysis:*

Act I: Within the first few pages the viewer must get some idea of what the story is about. This story is about Shaun overcoming shyness to get a date with Laura. The drama in the first few pages must be powerful enough to captivate the viewer. Drama results from the conflict between the characters.

During Act I the major characters are introduced. If they just walk on and chat for a moment, no one will remember them. The best way to introduce them is to show them involved in some problem or conflict during Act I, the sooner the better. In this story we quickly see Shaun wants to date Laura, Laura likes Shaun, Laura waves to Dave (who is described as a geek), and Tim lies to Laura about Shaun. By the end of Act 1, all the main characters have shown us what they want to do, and launched themselves on a collision course.

At the end of Act I comes a major turning point that propels the story into Act II. The protagonist (typically a good guy) comes squarely against the problem and makes a decision to succeed. In this story, Shaun decides to abandon everything and win Laura.

In Act II, tension builds as the protagonist repeatedly faces the problem, or obstacles. The problem seems to get bigger or more complicated each time the protagonist fights it. In this story, Dave is perceived to be the obstacle. He is always there, he always messes things up, and Laura seems to like him. Shaun believes Laura is out of his league and learns she is dating another guy. But the real problem is disguised—it is Shaun's fear to communicate (or of rejection).

Sometimes the situation changes into something else; for example the antagonist (bad guy) turns out to be a good guy and someone else is the bad guy. In *Prom Date*, Tim turns out to be the bad guy and Dave turns out to be the good guy. This is called a plot twist. The viewer sometimes knows what is really going on, and other times is completely surprised. Whether to let the viewer in on everything is part of strategy. If it is a surprise, it has to look real, not like something added at the last minute to make a surprise.

Often the protagonist gets discouraged and doesn't want to continue fighting. Then at the end of part two, he has found a reason to go on, and with renewed energy he decides to go forward. This turning point propels the story into Act III. In this story, Shaun loses hope when Tim tells him Laura is out of his league and dating a wealthy college guy. He regains hope after he overcomes a major obstacle, his fear of communicating, by talking to Dave the Geek.

Act III typically is short. The story comes to a climax, resolution and “denouement.” This means the protagonist is facing his major battle with the problem and brings it to a conclusion. Usually the protagonist finds himself in an impossible position and has to fight against impossible odds to free himself. Tension has reached fever pitch, the swords clash for the last time, and at the next sword stroke the hero wins in most stories. In this story Shaun rushes to see Laura, but Colin is parked in the drive. Shaun summons the courage to see the battle through and wins the girl. This is the climax (highest point of tension) and resolution. Resolution means the conflict is resolved.

The denouement (French, pronounced: day noo má, —I pronounced this denewment in a class once and was very embarrassed) ties up loose ends and satisfies the viewer's emotions. In this case, the subplot of the model airplane contest concludes the story. Shaun wins the race, rubbing Villain Tim's face in the dirt. Shaun has a new friend, Dave, and walks away with Laura. Often stories have no denouement, ending at the resolution. When it's over, it's over.

### *Optional Review Questions (Do it! These are fun.)*

Hey! You're trying to skip these and I put a lot of work into making these fun. You probably think you haven't learned a thing, but see what you know already—this isn't a test, it's reinforcement, and it will make you feel good and maybe get you a date... Maybe not if you're wearing loose fitting clothes with large vegetable patterns.

1) The three act structure:

- a. Is a bogus contrivance of Aristotle, who lived thousands of years before film and television, before anyone really knew anything.
- b. Can be used to help develop the very different sections of a typical story.
- c. Write the wrong answer here: \_\_\_\_\_

2) The protagonist is:

- a. The main character.
- b. The “good guy” (usually).
- c. The character who is struggling hardest to attain something.
- d. All of the above.

- 3) The antagonist:
  - a. Works against the “good guy.”
  - b. Has mud on his hat and antagonizes the “good guy.”
  - c. Is usually the “bad guy.”
  - d. “a” and “c” look right, but will have to get back to me about “b.”
- 4) Act I:
  - a. Hooks the audience with powerful drama (conflict).
  - b. Introduces the main characters with strong entrances (usually).
  - c. Shows us what the story is about.
  - d. Ends with a turning point where the protagonist decides to go after what he wants.
  - e. Hopefully all of the above.
- 5) Act II:
  - a. Is the name of wearing apparel.
  - b. Sags badly because nothing much happens until the end.
  - c. Is where the protagonist meets problems that get bigger and bigger, until he finally is almost defeated, but finds the strength to go after the prize in a final battle, which takes us into Act Three.
  - d. Is a waste of time because you really can just cut to the chase.
- 6) Act III:
  - a. Is where the protagonist faces his biggest challenge and reaches his goal.
  - b. Is the denouement where everything winds down and ties up loose ends.
  - c. Is the third obstacle where the protagonist falls flat on his face.
  - d. “a.” and “b.” are correct. Hey! You with the hair! *This* is the right answer.
- 7) A turning point is:
  - a. Where the character makes a major change in direction or intensity.
  - b. Where the story makes a major change in direction or intensity.
  - c. Where the audience gets up and leaves the theater.
  - d. “a.” and “b.” are probably correct, but sometimes “c.” is unfortunately true.
- 8) The denouement is:
  - a. The ending.
  - b. The resolution.
  - c. When the audience becomes emotionally satisfied with the outcome.
  - d. “a.” “b.” and “c.” all have possibilities. Go figure.

## GETTING STARTED

### What To Write—It's Up To You

Write about what interests you. Chances are if it interests you it will interest someone else. And if it interests you, you will write a much better story.

Write about what you know; not necessarily your personal experience, but something you have knowledge about. Knowing plays better than guessing.

Every story, even science fiction and far out comedy, is about life. Stories tell us something about the human condition. In comedy, we laugh at ourselves, the absurd, and the unexpected, making life more acceptable. In science fiction, we ponder the blanks in our knowledge, especially about life. In horror, we confront our fears, reminding ourselves what it means to live and be human. In action/adventure, we enjoy life and explore our limits and fantasies. In drama, we dwell on other dimensions of ourselves.

All stories, even if just for entertainment or escapism, talk about life—the difference is the attitude they are presented with. The stories liked best are life affirming—triumphant. If it entertains and triumphs, it affects the viewer's attitude.

Writing what interests you is best, but if you want to go for the gold, unique stories are in the most demand. A unique story is more likely to get attention. What sells best? Action/adventure. What is always in demand? Romantic comedy. What isn't a good gamble? The movies that are currently hot probably won't get any interest in a few months even though they may be followed quickly by several copycats.

Hint: Mystery and discovery are elements that add a lot of interest to stories. Discovery can be about being human, or about anything in the universe.

### Writing Methods—Pick A Method, Any Method

Everyone writes stories differently. Some just write from beginning to end, then rewrite. This way is sometimes considered more creative and fun, but there are frustrating dangers. The characters tend to completely take over the story and go in the wrong direction, and sometimes the story drifts around and goes nowhere. Another way to write is to make an outline so you know exactly how the story will end. Outlining, then writing, is more disciplined, and can be just as creative and fun. Whichever way you write, it's best to have some idea of where your story is going before you write so you don't waste your time.

*Following are two methods you might use to write your screenplay. I hope you find this helpful.*

*Method 1:* Have fun making your story! Write the beginning of your story and let it flow from you naturally. Let the characters do what they want. Become familiar with your characters and what is happening in their lives. After you have begun the story, start thinking ahead. What kinds of things might happen? Read the section on characterization. What should happen to these people? Read the section on Dramatic Structure. How should the story develop and end? As you write and read, jot down a few

notes about these things. This is the simplest form of plotting or outlining. I'll help you with some of the finer details in the following paragraphs.

*Method 2*, the more recommended method: Have fun making your story! Think up three or more characters and write notes about their past. I recommend notes about the major events and people who have shaped a character's life. What are your character's hobbies and goals? Who do they like and hate, and why? Read the section on Characterization. Now bring your characters together in a setting and situation and let them interact. Good stories often start from character. After you know your characters, what they want, and how they interact, begin to plot the story. Let the characters determine what happens—don't use them as puppets. Read the section on Dramatic Structure. I'll help you with some of the finer details in the following paragraphs.

## SCREENPLAY FUNDAMENTALS

### Characterization—Where It All Begins

Let's make a character. Take scissors and paper and cut out a paper doll. Perfectly blank cutouts. How many people do you think this blank paper doll is going to interest? Exactly no one! That's why many stories fall flat on their face—their characters are blank as a paper doll. His (or her) name is Chris. What characteristics do you think you would have to give Chris to make him interesting to yourself?

OK, you're trying to skip the question about characteristics, so now I'm going to stick you with Chris on a broken down bus in the middle of the Rocky Mountains. The driver has gone for help. It's cold and all you have for warmth is a blanket and each other. It's one a.m. and it's just you and Chris having an intimate conversation. What secrets are in his past? Are his parents divorced? How does he get along with his step parent? Is he abused? How does he like school? Who is hot on his list of dates to be? What's the worst thing he has ever done? The best? How does he feel about those things? Who does he really admire, and why?

Is your friend mean and vindictive at times? What made him that way? Is he moral? Immoral? Why? What does he really think about God? ... Sex? Has he ever seen a UFO or been possessed? What does your friend really want to happen to him this year? In the next month? Today?

OK, you're being too nice; this guy is coming off like an angel. This is your big chance to live vicariously—run with it. Put some dirt on him, smudge his reputation, give him an attitude. He can flunk out of school (or make straight A's), be on probation with the police, hang out with all the wrong people: politicians, lawyers, writers. He can even say irreverent things like that! He can be like you, or not be like you. Make him just unique enough to get attention.

Now that you've created a person, you have to like him. Or hate him. If he doesn't appeal to you for some reason, set him aside as a secondary character and make another. You really do have to care about the character you create. You see, I read a lot of scripts that spend the first half the story creating a character. That's how long it took the writer to really get to know his character and that's when he finally began to write. Only by then it was too late for the story.

I also see stories where the writer never did care about his characters. What happens is nothing. The writer walks the paper doll character through the story, making

it do this and that because that's what the plot calls for. He manipulates the character to make the story work and finally runs out of energy, so the story falls apart near the end because he never really worked up any interest in it. The reader doesn't care. The movie won't get made.

On the other hand, if you give your characters a past and wants and needs like real people, and care about them, a terrific thing happens. They take on a life of their own and make the story work. That doesn't mean you have to get romantically involved and all slobbery. It just means you should find your characters, and what happens to them, interesting to you from the start.

Put your characters together in a situation. Examples: a non-school competition, cruising at a fast food restaurant, an art show, a tractor pull, work, a trip, the hair stylist—you name it. Before you write much, where were they just prior to this scene and what are your characters going to do the next day? What event will bring each of these people into conflict? You now have all the information for a scene and the basis for a story. Have fun writing it!

*Review Questions:*

- 1) Good stories often come from:
  - a. Severely disturbed people.
  - b. Overactive imaginations.
  - c. Characters who have been well developed.
- 2) Well developed characters:
  - a. Have a past.
  - b. Have interests.
  - c. Have problems.
  - d. Want something (motivation).
  - e. All of the above.
- 3) Conflict develops when:
  - a. Your character's wants (motivations) conflict with another characters.'
  - b. An obstacle (some one, some thing, some situation) prevents your character from getting what he wants.
  - c. Both "a." and "b." are correct.
  - d. This is a trick question—you didn't fool me!
- 4) If I like my characters:
  - a. Others will like them.
  - b. I will have more interest in them and write a better story.
  - c. I will fall in love, spend all of my time writing, and end up in a mental hospital.
  - d. "a." and "b." are true, while "c." usually is not.

## The Plot: What Moves Your Story

The plot is the main plan of your story. It is the engine that drives the story forward on course. It is the hook, or mystery, or engaging *what if* that interests the viewer. The interest grabbing plot of *Prom Date* is Shaun's desire to date Laura. His desire for a date and his shyness make him do all the things he does.

The plot extends to include all the things that make the story work. Tim's deceitful ways are part of the plot. Dave's knowledge is part of the plot. Colin is part of the plot.

Plot is the most important part of a screenplay and is an integral part of the story, and the synopsis or outline. You can write out the plot, or you can weave the tangled web in your head. But you should know the basic plot.

The easiest way to plot a story is to know two things: What your characters want, and what the situation is. When the characters are put in a situation, they are going to start working to get what they want. For example, if Shaun wants a date for the prom, and Tim wants a date for the prom, and they're both interested in the same girl, what are they going to do? Shaun goes directly for the girl, but Tim takes the indirect deceitful route. Complicate things by throwing in some obstacles, like Dave and Colin, and you have a story.

Plotting a story can be a lot of fun. You keep asking yourself, "What would this character do in this situation?" or, "What would happen if this happened?" And you continue throwing them into worse and worse situations until they finally cave in or conquer the problem. It's fun to ask others what they think someone would do. You'll find by discussing it with others you'll get a lot of ideas and write a more believable screenplay. Start getting your ideas on paper as soon as possible. This helps solidify them so they don't drift around in space forever.

Part of the problem with plotting is that once you have planned your story through to the end, you know the ending and the thrill of discovery is finished for you. The way to avoid this is to remember that each scene is a little story in itself, so you have several little stories to write for your screenplay.

Hint: The mad rush to get it written can work in your favor. Instead of writing full scenes, write brief paragraphs about what is going to happen in the scenes or acts, so you get a brief sketch of the entire story on paper. There are always some great scenes you will want to write right away, so do it. This way the character's motivations can still drive the story, but not get out of control. (I use this method because it's more fun for me, and works well for me. This form of writing is called a "treatment," and is used by many writers.) Then the challenge is to make each scene develop into a powerful scene.

### *Subplot*

The subplot is like the plot, but not as important. It intertwines with the plot and helps develop it. In this story, the model airplane contest was a subplot. It made Shaun frustrated in Act I. It got him talking to Dave in Act II. In Act III it was part of the denouement.

Hint: Romance is a very typical subplot.

*Review Questions:*

- 1) A plot:
  - a. Has something to do with cemeteries.
  - b. Is the main conflict that makes everyone tense.
  - c. Flies airplanes and can't get the wing size right.
  - d. Is "b." above, plus everything that makes the story go and twist and turn.
- 2) A subplot:
  - a. Is beneath a casket in the cemetery.
  - b. Is a smaller parallel story that helps the main story develop.
  - c. Sits beside the main plot in an airplane.
  - d. Both "a." and "c." are correct (this answer deserves a story—write it).
- 3) An easy way to plot is to:
  - a) Know what your characters want.
  - b) Put your characters in a situation.
  - c) Put in a good mystery.
  - d) "a." and "b." are correct, and I might have read about "c." earlier.
- 4) Elements you may use to make your story more interesting are:
  - a) A romance subplot.
  - b) Mystery.
  - c) Discovery.
  - d) Life affirming.
  - e) These are all true, providing I develop the talent to actually do it.
- 5) A screenplay outline:
  - a) Follows a formal numerical format, like these questions.
  - b) May be brief paragraphs describing scenes and character interaction.
  - c) May keep me from wasting many hours and getting frustrated and quitting.
  - d) May include exciting scenes I can't wait to write.
  - e) Won't be the least bit interesting to other readers.

e) “b.”, “c.”, “d.” and “e.” are correct.

## **The Scene: Fundamental Building Block**

If you went home and told a friend today that one of your classmates, Trudy, "Made a scene in the school cafeteria with her boyfriend," your friend would know what you meant. Trudy had an argument with him, or gave him a kiss, or something like that. Whatever happened, it was in a setting: the cafeteria. It involved some bit of drama: an argument or a kiss. It lasted about three minutes before her boyfriend left to cool off. Those are the same things that a screenplay scene are about.

The scene is the fundamental building block of the screenplay. A scene is an unbroken piece of dramatic action that takes place in one setting. In other words, if you change to a different place or time, it's a new scene.

Scenes last an average of three minutes. They can last from a few seconds to several minutes, if needed. Sometimes scenes just give information; like seeing a shot of a car speeding to get somewhere. But main scenes are like little stories. There is usually some conflict—conflict is the heart of drama. Tension builds until one character decides to change things. Usually at least one character will change emotional states during the scene. He enters happy, leaves mad. She enters aloof, leaves touched.

Following are examples of typical scene descriptions from *Prom Date*:

Example 1: Shaun and Tim are leaving the school. Shaun's sister, Elizabeth, passes him with her boyfriend, John, and coyly asks Shaun if he has a date for prom yet, making him feel bad. Dave the Geek walks by and Tim says to Shaun, "At least we're not Geeks. Geeks never get a date." Laura comes toward them with a car full of girls. Shaun says, "I wish I could get a date with Laura." Laura waves to Dave. Shaun's and Tim's eyes bulge. Shaun drops his books onto the sidewalk and dismally trudges across the grass toward the gym. Next brief scene: Shaun enters and sits alone on the bleachers watching basketball practice. One player throws him a ball and asks him, "Did you get back on the team?" Shaun answers, "I can't; grades are too low." Discouraged, he hands the ball back and leaves.

Example 2: Shaun arrives at Laura's house for the first time, ready to impress her with hard to get tickets to a concert and to ask her for a date. He quickly pulls on a sweater as he leaves his car. Laura opens the door and smiles at him. He smiles at her, then sees over her shoulder. Dave rises from a table, waves, and goes to another room. Shaun is lost for words and Laura stares at him expectantly, finally saying, "Did you want something?" Dave comes to the door and says, "Shaun, you have your sweater on wrong side out." He looks down at it, sees the binding, and lies, "No... It's... meant to be this way." Dave smiles at him and says, "Now we know why you do so poorly in geometry. You don't know the inside of a circle from the outside." Dave and Laura laugh. Laura asks, "Do you want to come in?" Shaun replies, "I, uh, no..." He backs away, stumbling down the first step, and steps into a flower box. "Some other time." He quickly leaves as Dave and Laura collapse with laughter.

*Review Questions:*

- 1) Drama, or dramatic action, is the result of:
  - a. Conflict.
  - b. Conflicting character actions.
  - c. Conflicting situations.
  - d. A kiss. A kiss is just a kiss, but it can sure create a scene. Whew!
  - e. Um... I like them all.
- 2) Gripping stories must have (I'm sure you want it to be *gripping*):
  - a. Conflict, which produces tension.
  - b. More of the above to make it really captivate people.
  - c. All of the above.
- 3) Conflict is:
  - a. When you argue with your brother over chewing gum.
  - b. When your character wants something, and it is out of reach.
  - c. When the good guy wants something, and the bad guy won't let him have it.
  - d. When the bad guy wants something, and the good guy won't let him have it.
  - e. Yes to all of them.

## Dialogue: Writing What People Say

In real life, I'm not a person who does much small talk and I'm kind of quiet, unless I'm leading a seminar. But I make a lot of noise on paper. In fact, my dialogue tends to run on and on. Many people have the opposite problem, they talk a lot, but find dialogue difficult to write. Whether people find it difficult or easy, their dialogue usually needs a lot of polishing.

Dialogue is the words that people say. There is no place for a *he said*, or *she felt*, just the words. Example:

ELIZABETH  
Thanks a lot, dweeb!

You might clarify Elizabeth's emotions with a dialogue instruction if there is a compelling reason. For example: Elizabeth understands why her boyfriend, John, made her angry: he was having problems at home.

ELIZABETH  
(Compassionately)  
Thanks a lot, dweeb.

Good stories with good dialogue will leave little doubt as to the meaning and will not need *compassionately*, but use enough dialogue instructions to make it clear.

Dialogue should be as short, or *crisp*, as possible. The standard dialogue line is three inches long. Three of those lines is about as long as will play well. When it is longer, it needs to be focused, broken up, or polished.

Trying to say too many things at one time is a common problem. Make the line say just one thing, or, respond to the previous line and say something new. Take the following poor dialogue for example:

JOHN

I've been looking all over for you. Where were you today? I've looked up and down the hall and in all the classes. I couldn't figure it out! What do you want to do after class? I'm going to the frog races, do you want to come?

ELIZABETH

I've been around—you know me, I'm lost half the time. Sorry you missed me. I don't know what I want to do after class. Frog races! I may be out of my mind, but I'm not crazy. No, let's do something else.

Compare to this:

JOHN

Where were you today?

ELIZABETH

How should I know? I just inhabit this body. I skipped out again.

JOHN

Not again! I was afraid of that. I've been looking all over for you.

ELIZABETH

I'm so sorry, John. It's sweet of you to look out for me.

JOHN

I'm going to the frog races after class. Want to come?

ELIZABETH

Frog races! Just because my mind is gone, doesn't mean I'm crazy.

JOHN

Then can I give you a lift home?

(CONTINUED)

Elizabeth staggers across the sidewalk and looks faint. John holds her steady.

JOHN (CONT)

Yes, I will take you home.

When dialogue lines are interrupted by a scene instruction line, or continued on the next page, then (CONTINUED) is written at the break in the dialogue and by the character name where it resumes. This convention is not always used.

### *Review Questions:*

1) Dialogue should:

- a) Talk about next weeks date, hobbies, and what's new on TV.
- b) Be as brief as possible and focus on what the character wants.
- c) Be three inches long, and usually less than three lines.
- d) "b." and "c." Reply to previous dialogue and say something new.

## **Set-ups For Short Scripts**

Ten-to-twenty-minute short stories don't have time to give character histories, introduce many characters, make elaborate plot set ups, or do much unwinding at the end. They have few characters, simple and direct plots, and no unwinding. The synopsis for *Prom Date*, a thirty-minute story, is too long for a ten page story. Instead, launch right into the problem with Shaun having Tim ask Laura for a date for Shaun. Tim lies to Laura about Shaun, and asks for a date himself. He lies to Shaun, saying she already has a date. Shaun needs to talk to Dave the Geek about a math problem. Dave is also Laura's tutor and he tells Shaun that Laura actually likes him, but she is going to the prom with Tim because he asked first. Shaun immediately wants to fight Tim, but Dave tells him not to act like Tim, but to talk to Laura like a real person, and just refute the lies. If Laura wants to go with him, she has reason enough to dump Tim. Shaun realizes Dave is really a nice guy. He overcomes his shyness and convinces her Tim told her lies, and gets the prom date.

For short scripts, choose less complicated problems. Use no more main characters than necessary. Know exactly what the story is about and don't sidetrack. For example, this short version is about overcoming shyness and what can happen if shyness prevents you from taking responsibility for your life. Any subplot should be very integrated with the main plot so it doesn't take time to develop by itself. The main subplot is that Shaun's communicating with Dave brought understanding of Dave and opened up an entire new world of friendship and benefits. The second subplot, which is undeveloped in the above short synopsis, is Tim's bitter lesson of losing his best friend because of his selfish actions. The shorter the story, the fewer the obstacles and complications that should arise.

### *Characters For Short Scripts*

If you meet a man at a bus stop, say hello and part, you learn very little about him. He could be an ax murderer or a billionaire, or both. The same can happen in a short script, so it is essential to turn up the focus on the characters. There are several ways to do that.

First, make sure the audience feels strongly about him. The good guy should be likable, the bad guy gut wrenching. For example, the first thing the bad guy does is get angry and abuse something. Beyond that, the audience should feel for his situation. They might pity him in his plight, or feel outrage, or admire him for facing danger.

The character should have one, or at the most two, strong character traits. He might be very smart, but have no street smarts. Very perceptive. Very pushy. Very lazy. Very dishonest. Hint: bring strong traits out in subtle ways. Instead of the smart guy showing everyone up by answering a difficult question, let him give the answer later.

Whatever it is the character wants (his motivation) should be the main thing on his mind, if not the only thing, from page one to page last. For example, if Julie really wants to find a very expensive ring of her mother's which she lost, before her parents get home from their trip, she won't be distracted by requests for dates, visits to her grandparents, and watching television all day. However, something on equal par, like the risk of losing a previously scheduled date with her dream-boat of two years, might be an interesting complication, especially if he becomes the key to finding the lost ring.

The characters should surround themselves with symbols of their character. The power executive might dress in a pin stripe suit, wing-tip shoes, power tie, and carry a thin leather briefcase with a portable phone inside. He jets to the islands for the weekend, club memberships, committees. He drives a BMW with a FAX machine. He has a large house inside a burb with a privacy wall, exercise machine in one room, a dog who bites him and a kid he calls by the wrong name. Down the street lives a poor seven-year-old boy in a two bed apartment, with a dog named Bones, and Aunt Carey, who would do anything for him. He dresses in distressed blue jeans, clean pull over shirts and sneakers. In a vacant lot he has a Head Hunter's club that collects dead animal skulls and doll heads, which are used primarily to frighten away girls.

## Format

Why bother with format? Suppose you were a film executive and you liked two stories equally well, but had to choose only one. Shooting a film costs several thousand dollars a minute, sometimes close to a million. When you looked at one script, you weren't able to tell how long it was, how many scenes were to be filmed outside at locations requiring expensive transportation, or how many scenes were to be filmed at night, keeping expensive actors and film crews up all night. The writer hadn't bothered to do it in the correct format, and who knows what else he might have neglected. Which one would you choose? An example scene from *Prom Date* is on p18.

### *Screenplay Script Technical Specifications:*

Typewritten. 1-1/2 inch left margin. 1 inch top, right, and bottom margins

Binding: Preferred—Three hole bound with brass brads. No cover, or plain cover with title and writer's name.

Title page: Title mid-page. Writer's name mid-page. Name, address and phone at lower left corner.

No cast page, or scene layouts, or other pages.

Dates and draft numbers are not recommended. A WGA number is common, and is typically used in place of a copyright notice (which is dated). Scripts must be registered, for a fee, with the Writer's Guild to obtain a WGA number.

First story page: No title or writer's name on this or following script pages. A running heading is acceptable but not common.

### *Types of scripts*

You may hear of several types of scripts. Although there are representative styles of scripts, there is no standard script format. The following format information is based on commonly accepted conventions.

***Masterscene Script:*** Scene by scene presentation of the drama. This is the form usually used for initial readings, and ***the format used for this guide.***

***Shooting Script:*** A very technical script listing the camera shots to be used during filming. Shooting scripts are prepared by directors, or other experienced professionals, from masterscene scripts. ***This form is not used with this guide.***

***Teleplay Script:*** Television script. ***This form is not used with this guide.*** But for information, TV shows specify the type format they use. They often use a format that resembles an audio/visual script with dialogue on one side of the page and camera and technical directions on the other, and also often use the scripts typically used by the film industry. Drama, sitcoms, soaps and TV movies all use different formats. A guide such as *The Writer's Digest Guide to Manuscript Formats* gives representative samples. Scripts for TV only need to follow a special format when submitted to a specific show. It would be necessary to write the producer for instructions.

DON'T SEND SCRIPTS or more than a sentence of information about a story to the film or TV industry; they will only be refused.

### *Slug line*

Scenes are always preceded by a slug line that tells whether the scene is inside or out, the location, and whether it is day or night. Examine the following slug line and see if you can easily write one yourself:

INT. JOHNNY'S APARTMENT—DAY

INT. = Interior EXT. = Exterior

### *Scene Description Lines*

The slug line is followed immediately by scene description lines. These tell more about the setting, who is in the scene, and sometimes where they are located and what they are doing. Important instructions are placed here.

Scene instruction lines occur throughout the scene as needed. They often instruct about essential character actions, such as shooting another character.

Characters sometimes talk when they aren't within camera range, or are on the phone, radio, etc. When this happens, you write the character name and dialogue as usual, but next to the character name write (O.S.) when they are off screen, or (V.O.) when the voice is dubbed or reproduced (voice over).

Two other conventions: Everything is written in present tense—don't put *ed* on the end of words. Put a character's name in ALL CAPITALS in the scene description lines the first time the character appears in the script.

### *Terms*

Only one technical term is needed in Masterscene scripts: DISSOLVE.

**Scene changes:** In modern film, scenes change abruptly from one to the next. This is termed CUT TO, and is *unnecessary* to write in the script unless there is some risk of confusion. To show that time has elapsed, DISSOLVE is used. This means the ending scene, or shot, fades out while the next fades in. When needed, it is necessary to write DISSOLVE at the right margin: DISSOLVE

FADE IN can be written at the beginning of the script. FADE OUT at the end. Both terms are *unnecessary*. If you need to fade to black, write FADE OUT at the right margin.

**Shots** tell the director what the camera is pointed at. Don't use the word camera in a script, always use SHOT. Specifying shots and other technical things interferes with reading the story. Avoid using shots if at all possible. The writer's job is to tell the story in words. The director's job is to tell it cinematically. He will decide what shots are necessary. For example, if Elizabeth sees a bug inside her milk glass, just write: "Elizabeth sees a bug inside her milk glass. She makes a face." The director will decide what shots to use to show that.

The following example scene from *Prom Date* illustrates the proper format to use.

EXT. CROWN HILL HIGH SCHOOL—DAY (slug line)

SHAUN and TIM are walking away from the school carrying books. RYAN is about to leave in a funny car. Shaun is ignoring his sister, ELIZABETH, who is approaching with her boyfriend, JOHN. (Scene description lines)

SQUEALING TIRES (Sound effects line)

All the students hug the inside edge of the sidewalk or take to the grass. Tim steps on Shaun's sister, Elizabeth, who is walking by. The cars on the street clear a wide path for Ryan. Shaun sees Elizabeth and frowns at Tim. (Scene instruction lines)

HORNS HONKING, POLICE SIREN

ELIZABETH

(Smug.) (Dialogue direction line)

Shaun, do you have a date for prom? (Dialogue line)

Shaun and Tim ignore Elizabeth and walk on. DAVE walks by them toward the parking lot.

DAVE

Hi, guys.

SHAUN

Hail, Dave.

TIM

(Under breath)

King of Geeks.

LAURA exits the parking lot with a CAR LOAD OF GIRLS. Shaun and Tim watch as the car approaches.

SHAUN

What wouldn't I give for a prom date with Laura?

TIM

Give your brain, you won't lose much.

SHAUN

At least we're not geeks. Geeks never get dates.

Laura and Dave the Geek exchange waves. Shaun and Tim stand on the sidewalk with their eyes bulging. Shaun drops his books on the sidewalk then trudges toward the gym.

### **Rewriting: The Best Kept Secret In Hollywood**

The pros say the secret to effective screenwriting is rewriting to make the story do exactly what you want it to. If something doesn't work, I don't hesitate to change it. I get feedback from others, then rewrite. Rewriting can seem boring, but if you think of it as crafting a fine story and making it do what you want, then it is more fun. Following are tips for rewriting:

1) The story seems weak—no pizzazz.

What does your main character have to lose? If the stakes are too low, there will be very little interest.

Is this a rehash of some plot we already know? Add new problems. Find different solutions.

2) The story wanders.

What does your main character want? Remove the scenes, dialogue, events and actions that stray from reaching that goal.

Are the subplots taking over the story? Too many characters with too many motivations will take the story in too many directions.

3) A character doesn't act consistently the same through the story.

What does the character want? He should be trying to achieve that.

Are his motives too hidden? Show what they are.

4) The plot seems hard to believe.

Did you make real characters and put them in a real setting? Or did you make up the characters and setting as you went along, conveniently adding whatever worked? Real characters work in real settings. Remake your characters and setting with real limitations.

Are your characters responding like real people might do, or are they just doing imaginative thing? Make your characters stay within a normal realm of behavior, unless you're writing fantasy.

5) The story is like the pages of my friend's life—it goes everywhere but nowhere.

Real life anecdotes are difficult to work into a story, and stories that use them usually play like a series of unconnected stories, and no one wants to bend the facts to fit the story. If something that happened in real life fits with your character's motivation, use it. If not, throw it out.

6) The main character wins every battle very easily. It's boring.

The good guy and bad guy (or conflicting situation) should be equally matched.

7) People like the lesser characters better than the protagonist.

A lesser character often steals the show. Either limit his role, or give his characteristics to the main character.

8) The main character ends the story just like he began it—same person, same problems.

The main character should change as a result of the story. He becomes stronger, wiser, discovers inner resources, is better at handling problems, or acquires new abilities.

9) The dialogue is boring and it goes nowhere.

Dialogue results from the conflict when two characters are trying to reach different goals. What do the characters want?

Giving information makes bad dialogue. Use conflict situations to give information. If it isn't important to the character, then he doesn't need it.

Focus on what the story is about. If it isn't important to the story, don't say it. For example, introductions, entering the scene, making plans—all can be kept very short.

10) The dialogue and scenes go on forever.

Less is more. The shorter things are, the more pointed they are.

11) Over half the script is already taken up with character history and explaining motivation.

Screenplays are not like novels. The first pages need to be filled with dramatic action, not character history. Older screenplays commonly began like a novel, but that is less acceptable with today's audiences. Characterization is shown through the character's behavior (words or actions). Set the pages aside as a character sketch and begin again, drawing on action from the previous pages. It isn't wasted.

## **Beware! Things That Bring Bad Results:**

Don't have one character tell another what he should do, especially through an authority figure. The character should find his own solutions.

Don't use acts of God and events that come out of nowhere. The characters should make their own solutions, not some outside force. For example, Johnny's need for money shouldn't suddenly be resolved by winning the lottery, or the death of a rich uncle.

Don't have a character say what the story is about or what the moral message of it is. These things should be obvious by the character's actions. That doesn't mean a character doesn't listen to an inner voice, but his motivations should be clear and solutions should be caused by him.

Don't repeatedly set up a problem in one scene and resolve it in the next. That rhythm loses viewer interest.

Don't give people special powers. Even the science fiction series *Star Trek*, with its cast of aliens, is about real people facing real life problems in unusual conditions, and the powers the aliens have is very limited. The exception is fantasy stories.

Movies with excessive foul language, sex, and violence, especially when not necessary to the story, are not well received in the film industry. Movies that demean

people, or feature gratuitous mistreatment of people or animals, are typically ignored by film industry readers, which prevents them from getting to producers and directors.

Don't number the scenes.

Don't use technical terms or specify camera shots or angles. No one will notice their absence, but their presence is disruptive and often amateurish or erroneous.

Don't give stage directions to the actor unless it is necessary for clarity. The actors' and directors' jobs are to thoroughly analyze a script and plan every word and move. They will decide how to act the play. But keep in mind that the script is first read by others and giving some idea of what you had in mind is often needed for clarity. They can mark it out later.

Don't indicate how the actor got from one scene to the next or what he did in the mean time unless it helps the story. If he is there, we'll know he got there by some customary means and assume he probably didn't materialize. If he was traveling over lunch time, we'll assume he had sense enough to stop and eat. Coming, going and eating are not what make a story.

Don't spell the action out in great detail in action scenes (scenes with a lot of movement). Give highlights of chase scenes or fights, not blow-by-blow descriptions.

Don't write the way people actually speak. People meander, repeat, change subjects, get verbose and obtuse, but none of these help a script. Scripts need to be as direct as possible without losing the essence of the character or losing the drama.

Don't use quotation marks or *he said, she said, or she felt...* in dialogue. Dialogue must stand on its own.

Don't use slang words or phrases and foul language. They tend to date your script and obscure the meaning of the dialogue. Movies aren't reality, and excessive realism detracts from instead of enhancing them.

Don't use flashbacks, if possible. Flashbacks work poorly in film and usually slow the action. When a story is moving backward, it isn't going forward.

## HELPFUL THINGS

### *Stolen Property Statement—Please Read!*

Ideas and titles are not subject to copyright law. Written works are. Copying portions of others' work is plagiarism. Writers Workshop, myself, and most of the film industry has high respect for other's creative properties—indeed, live in fear of law suits and normally won't even hear an idea or see a script except through an agent and with a release form. This program provides a unique opportunity for a large number of scripts to be recognized. With the safeguards provided by the Writer's Guild, copyright law, and the legal climate, the risk of plagiarism is extremely limited. However, the film industry is an idea industry. Once an idea is made public, it is public property. (But even ideas are respected in the business and are purchased when offered through legitimate channels.)

There are literally many thousands of people writing scripts and submitting them each year, but less than 400 films are made each year, plus TV episodes. There are only so many basic plots possible (around 36). The variations are in the full story line: subplots, characters and situations. A writer's skill is not so much in forming the basic plot, but in creating characters, a story line, and fleshing it out. It is very likely that writers will see something similar to their basic plot on TV within the next one to three

years, or even a similar story line, especially if the topic is hot, or very universal. This doesn't mean their script has been plagiarized, or indicate a lack of creative talent in Hollywood. It simply indicates the reality of the creative world. Great minds think alike.

If you believe actual plagiarism has occurred within the film industry, you can contact a lawyer or the Writer's Guild for sound advice on how to proceed to rectify the situation. East of the Mississippi River, contact Writer's Guild of America, East, Inc. 555 West 57th. Street, New York, NY 10019-2967. West of the Mississippi, contact Writer's Guild of America, West, Inc. 8955 Beverly Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90048. The Writer's Guild is a bargaining agency for members with produced screen plays, but can provide limited information to non-members.

## Teacher's Information

This guide is not intended as a textbook. No attempt has been made to use precise definitions of terms or to teach theory of literature or creative writing. It is intended only as a practical aid to help people write a screenplay, and may be found a useful resource for conventional curriculums.

This guide emphasizes an intuitive rather than analytical approach. Concepts in this guide are presented in an order that will get people writing and interested enough to dig deeper. Characterization, dramatic structure (including plot), dialogue, the scene and format are essential to writing a screenplay. The remainder is improving on the basics.

The phrase, *what this story is about*, is often substituted for *concept, plot, theme, and premise*. *Concept* is an excellent tool for focusing dramatic structure. *Theme* and *premise* can be useful tools, but are less often used. *Plot* is the most useful tool and has been explained in some depth.

Contemporary wisdom has it that characterization is the essential starting point for a screenplay and that story follows from character. However, many writers need some idea of what their story is about before they can even begin developing characters. For example, as people confront questions in their life they often choose to write about them. Characters become a device for exploration. Writing is an interactive process and there is no one best starting point for all stories. Building characters is an excellent beginning exercise from which stories can develop and exploration can blossom.

I recommend workshopping one screenplay in class as an excellent vehicle for gaining interest, participation, and learning. The workshopping approach allows writers to both write the story and see the result through staged reading. See note below.

I Hope you or one of your students will write the next *Home Alone!* Please be aware that ALL scripts submitted to anyone associated with the TV and movie industry must be submitted through an agent with a Release Form. The Writer's Guild can supply you with a list of agents, particularly those willing to take new clients. A query letter to a receptive agent will get you a Release Form. Good luck!

### *Resources:*

Screenplay staged reading techniques developed by Willard Rodgers (which vary considerably from plays), and extensive additional information on screenwriting is available in my book, *Writers Workshop Script Doctor*, available through National Writers Workshop. Your local library and bookstores will likely have books by popular

authors, such as: Lajos Egri, Eugene Vale, Syd Field, Linda Seger, Linda Stuart, Cynthia Whitcomb, and others, which cover various aspects of screenwriting.

Additional copies of *How To Write A Screenplay* are available free from National Writers Workshop.

Also available through National Writers Workshop: *Writers Workshop Script Doctor*. Find structural problems in screenplay scripts, learn how to fix them and where to get help. Add professional touches to your script using visual writing techniques. A percentage of the royalty goes to National Writers Workshop. National Writers Workshop is a non-profit organization and depends on revenue and sponsor donations to operate its writer assistance programs. Call for current prices and volume discounts.

Contact National Writers Workshop by mail at PO Box 69799, Los Angeles, CA, 90069, or by phone at 213-933-9232. Willard Rodgers, Director.