Screenplay Writing: The Art of Writing Films

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This article is about Stark's journey of discovering screenplay writing and how it has affected him. He also explains some beginner's tips on how to write a screenplay and how to do so with an original style. The goal of this article is to present screenplay writing as a genre option, especially for people who love movies, like Stark.

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I'm a movie guy. Always have been, always will be. I'm the kind of guy who will spend hours talking about certain movies and what they mean or symbolize. When I was younger, my parents showed me all kinds of movies that inspired my creativity. *Terminator Two: Judgment Day*, *Star Wars*, and *Alien* were only a few of the many that prompted me to become a movie-goer. Movies let people's minds wander into imaginary worlds to surprise, shock, or thrill them through the stories they tell. Films are portals to get away from everyday life as we get pulled into the thought-up worlds on screen. Movies make us feel all kinds of emotions of excitement and happiness (depending on the movie). We meet characters that we'll remember for what they did or some iconic phrase they said. Films can amaze us because of the amount of layers they have to keep their stories interesting and powerful.

Having built up my fascination for movies from a young age, eventually I came to my sophomore year of high school: the year I started developing my own screenplays. I remember watching a behind-the-scenes making of the film *Alien*, directed by Ridley Scott, and realizing that *Alien* is such

a great movie, to me, because of its way of filming, its vivid plot, and its realistic characters. The film takes these three elements and creates what I consider to be one of the greatest movies ever made. The behind-the-scenes film explains the pre-production of *Alien* and shows parts of the original screenplay used for the film, which immediately caught my attention. I stopped the movie to view the format of the screenplay; I wanted to investigate this genre, the writing behind the movie. I had been aware of what screenplays were, but before that moment, I had never taken the time to really look at one.

After getting only a few seconds of reading the actual screenplay of one of my favorite movies, I immediately felt the need to get more exposure to this genre: I wanted to read full-length screenplays. I wanted to read the stories of movies; I wanted to see how they were written to find out how movies could tell stories so well. I searched the Internet until I stumbled upon the Internet Movie Script Database (IMSDB). This website was my first step in to learning how to write my own screenplays. I studied screenplays such as *Titanic*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Alien*, and many more to become familiar with the style and the strict format. I soon realized that this would not be enough. I was reading screenplays to gain familiarity with them, but I needed instructions as to how to properly write one of my own. I needed a step-by-step guide for building my own screenplays.

After searching the web and a few Border's book stores, I finally found the book that would open my world to screenplays even more: *The Hollywood Standard: The Complete and Authoritative Guide to Script Format and Style* by Christopher Riley. The book allowed me to go further with my screenplay writing research than I had before. Riley explains the conventions for what I now think of as all the important aspects of a screenplay:

1. Introducing a scene

2. Properly introducing a character

3. The importance of dialogue

4. Off-screen sounds

5. Scene visualization

6. Character details

After reading the book and reviewing it as much as I could, I've become much more knowledgeable in writing my own screenplays. The book helped me find errors in my own work and common errors that many screenplay writers make. From this research, I was able to build

myself up and write the stories I wanted to, in the format I want to write them in.

One of the lessons I have learned about screenplay writing, and which I think is true of other genres as well, is that a writer must grow into his or her own style of writing. Writers may get inspiration from other writers, but copying another writer's style won't get them far. When writers have their own styles, it allows them to stand out from everyone else. For example, I think Stephen King is one of the greatest living authors of our time. His way of storytelling and providing gripping detail is such that readers all over the world know when they're reading one of King's tales. Writers should be able to demonstrate who they are in their writing; when someone reads a writer's work, the reader should be able to identify whose work they're reading by the way the author has written it. Screenplay writers need to write according to the general conventions and format of the genre of the screenplay, but they must also tell their stories in such a way that readers would automatically recognize who wrote the screenplay. Of course, this doesn't happen right away when someone is just trying out the genre and is usually only the case for very famous, successful screenplay writers, but it's still a good goal to keep in mind. One step towards this goal is for screenplay authors to develop skills in visualization.

In this way, screenplay writing is similar to other kinds of writing. A screenplay writer must be able to create a strong visual impression with his or her words. By this I mean that a screenplay writer should compose in such a way so that whoever is reading his or her script can visualize the story with great detail. Screenplay writers need to develop the writing skills to create a world that their readers (and eventually viewers) can visualize and understand easily. A great example would be *Star Wars* or James Cameron's *Avatar*. Both these films have worlds that need to be explained with great detail in order for readers to get a "visual understanding" of the setting and scenes. In order for the visuals to be born on screen the way the writer conceives of them, the writer must put them on paper in such a way to allow his or her vision to come through. Screenplay writers need to be able to create this "visual understanding" so well that the reader won't want to put the script down. Overall, that's what screenplay writers hope for in the film business: the chance to have their work read and enjoyed.

Let's take a look at some examples, now, to investigate some of the conventions of creating a screenplay with the kind of visualization techniques I've been talking about. Screenplays start out by explaining where the story takes place. Consider this example:

Properly introduce scene; remember it's like watching a movie.

This is the direction. It takes place inside a house, inside the kitchen, at night time, specifically, eight thirty.

When introducing characters into the story, their names or referents must be capitalized in to show the importance to the reader.

Also, objects that make noises must be capitalized, and the noise they make must be capitalized as well.

Explain what's going on. Give the reader a picture in their head.

This is the first character and his dialogue.

This is the second character and his dialogue.

If you want to be more specific with the camera angles, feel free to do so. This can only help with visualization.

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FADE IN:

INT. HOUSE – KITCHEN - NIGHT – 8:30

TWO MEN sit across from each other at a long table.
Each MAN has a GUN. The TWO MEN grin at each other.
Hatred burns in their eyes. The MAN ON THE LEFT side
of the table has a scar going down the right side of
his face. It's been there a while. The MAN ON THE
RIGHT side of the table has a fresh cut on his left
cheek and his right eye is starting to bruise. They
both wear farmers' clothes mixed with some cowboy
style to them.

                    MAN ON THE LEFT
          I never thought we'd be here.

                    MAN ON THE RIGHT
           I knew we would one day.

The grin stays on both faces. The TWO MEN lift the
GUNS off the table and click the safeties off. The
GUNS are pointing at each other.

                    MAN ON THE LEFT
              Ready partner?

                    MAN ON THE RIGHT
               Let's dance.

The CAMERA ZOOMS OUT with the TWO MEN pointing the
guns at each other. The screen fades to black and we
hear CHAIRS FALLING, MULTIPLE GUNSHOTS, and WINDOWS
BREAKING.
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Screenplays are always written in Courier New. It's the font for film. Always capitalizing the names emphasizes to the reader who is doing or saying what. Similarly, capitalizing something that is making noise and the noise it makes allows for readers to understand an action scene and what or whom is involved in that scene.

As I mentioned earlier, the most important element I've learned for screenplay writing is visualization. By visualization I mean that whatever you see in your mind you MUST write in great, but limited detail in the

screenplay. What you see in your mind, the reader must be able to see. Give your characters distinct details if they have them or show the characteristics of the room in which the characters are acting. The reason some movies are so great in displaying detail is because the screenplay writers knew how to bring the stories to life on paper. For example, with the gunmen at the table, I described what they looked like with specifics so the reader would know the differences between them, other than just MAN ON THE LEFT and MAN ON THE RIGHT. Giving this description makes the characters more memorable and can allow for more tension between the characters.

Another important convention to keep in mind is that despite the need for visualization, it's not a novel; the script must get straight to the point. Screenplay writers can use detail, but not too much detail:

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EXT. ST. ANDREWS HIGH SCHOOL PARKING LOT – DAY – 3
P.M.

It's a sunny day on the parking lot of St. Andrews
High School. Kids are leaving school. Parents are
picking up kids and the buses are getting ready
to leave the school. We ZOOM IN to KEVIN SMITH.
Kevin has spiked hair and wears brown shorts and
a white t-shirt. His ripped backpack hangs on his
left shoulder and his right sandal has duct tape on
it keeping it together. He walks across the parking
lot to his car when he sees RACHEL SOLER running up
to him.

                    RACHEL

              KEVIN! WAIT!

Kevin smiles.

                    KEVIN (V.O.)

          Why does she keep bothering me

              to ask me about things that

          don't matter? What's she hiding?

Rachel is wearing pink t-shirt and skinny blue jeans.
Her hair is light blonde and is surprisingly wearing
no shoes or socks. She runs up and starts painting
while trying to talk.
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I highly recommend getting a screenplay software program like Celtx. It's a free program for screenplay and theatre writers and hasn't disappointed me yet. Screenplay dialogue has to have certain spacing and formatting. Instead of doing it yourself and struggling with the spacing in Microsoft Word, let Celtx do it for you so you can focus on your story.

                              RACHEL

          Hey . . . (pant) . . . can I have a—

                              KEVIN

            Yes, you can have a ride.

                              RACHEL

            Thanks . . . (pant) . . . and—

                              KEVIN

          Yes, I'll help you with the math

        homework. But first, where are your shoes?

                                              CUT TO:

The first thing I did in this example was to add a small amount of significant detail. I didn't write how big the school was or what it was shaped liked because I decided that it didn't matter to the story. I wrote "a school" in order for the reader to imagine the school they see in their minds. Likewise, I gave a general definition of what an average school parking lot would be like after school ends. A lot of readers can probably relate to this and will be able to visualize an image of the scene quickly.

Kevin and Rachel were written about with some detail for a few reasons. The first is to provide some basic notions of they look like so that readers will be able to picture them clearly. Second, they're not the average kids you see in high school; not the football player, not the prep, not the cheerleader—they're just themselves. They have personalities that are unlike those readers might assume based on the school system they participate in. This presents their individualism; they do and dress how they please and not according to the Internet or what the TV says is the hottest fashion. This also indicates that they have special significance to the plot of the story.

Personally, I will sometimes include what the characters are wearing in order to put a good picture in the reader's mind of what the characters look like. Sometimes I will use other details, but only if it is necessary for the story. Unnecessary details are just a waste of space and could be annoying to the reader. I will give characters certain looks or describe something about the character in a certain way in order to represent a part of the story that needs to be told correctly. Clearly, different writers provide different levels of detail about their characters to achieve different purposes. For example, in some cases, what the characters wear early in the movie can be representative of what kind of person they will become further into the movie.

A writer can be as detailed as he or she wants about the characters, but the characters' actions need to be brought alive by what they say and how they say things. Every person reacts differently to certain situations, and it's important to show that. Each character needs to have a distinct personality. It's important for both the writer and reader to know when an important character has been brought into the story and also to realize who the character is and what makes the character the way he or she is. Good writers never create characters that look, speak, and act the same as everyone else in the story. It'd be way too boring. The story would die in less than five minutes. A story needs chemistry and diversity. Using both those tools in a dynamic way, a writer will create great character development and interaction between characters in the story.

Also central to character development is dialogue. Dialogue is kind of like acting. Actors have different styles of acting. One well-known style is called method acting, which *Wikipedia* defines as "any of a family of techniques used by actors to create in themselves the thoughts and feelings of their characters, so as to develop lifelike performances." When I write, I do something similar. I call it method writing (I know, clever name). When I'm writing characters and their dialogue, I imagine getting into their minds to see how they would see the world. This allows me, as a writer, to be able to write each character in a way so they don't all feel and sound the same. The characters have stronger conversations, their emotions are expressed more fluidly, and it's just a fun way to write. It's similar to being in someone else's shoes and bringing life to something new in a different way.

Another important element of screenplay writing is learning how to pace the story. It's important to learn how to build the story and to let the characters grow and evolve as the story goes on. Let the story flow; build characters, scenes, and elements. To research how this is best done, I recommend seeing movies and reading screenplays. If you want some good examples of perfectly paced movies, I highly recommend watching *The Shawshank Redemption* and *Alien*; these movies have great pacing, which allows the story and the characters time to evolve. These films will help you to understand how pacing a film/story is truly done. However, keep in mind that a lot of movies today—at least in my opinion—have stories that could be great but rush through some parts in order to get to a certain point in the story, which I think ruins the story in a way.

As you may have figured out already, screenplay writers have to follow certain formatting rules, or film studios will not seriously consider them. In fact, in some ways it is the formatting that makes a screenplay a screenplay. I have already mentioned several examples of this—such as the specific font that is required—but I'll mention a few more. For example, EXT. means exterior, which shows that the following scene will be taking place outside. For an inside

setting, screenplay writers use INT., meaning interior. Also, you'll notice that when I wrote Kevin's dialogue, at one point I wrote (V.O.) by his name; the (V.O.) stands for voice over. This means that the camera will show that Kevin is obviously not talking, but the audience will still be able to hear his voice. Most of the time voice over allows the character to function as a narrator, or it can express what he or she is thinking in his or her mind. The function of voice over can vary from writer to writer. It's important to note that while every screenplay writer follows certain rules, such as those I've described here, individual writers may do a few things differently to show their style.

As I alluded to earlier, screenplays are mainly read by movie studio executives, film agents, directors, producers, etc. These are people within the movie industry that determine whether or not the screenplay is good enough to make into a movie as well as how much money, time, and energy it will cost the studio to produce. The reason "EXT," "INT," "V.O.," and other directions like these are used in screenplays is to help the director and the studio determine where and how to film certain parts, or how to pace and film the story to follow the characters' actions. Lighting, extras, and set pieces are all important parts of this process. These days, it's about how much it's going to cost a studio to make the movie and how much more they're going to make out of the film.

Sometimes studios will take control of a script to make more money out of it. By this I mean the studio will change major aspects of the story to create what they believe will yield a bigger income if the movie is to be produced and filmed. They might change characters, parts of the story, or locations or topics to be represented in the film. I would argue that in these kinds of situations, studio executives can forget an important rule: without a great story, there can't be a great movie. In translation for the studio executives: without a good story, there's no cash.

That's why it's important for screenplay writers to practice and perfect their art, to explain the worlds they imagine with the joy and excitement that they then bring out onto the pages of their writing. When a writer puts true emotion and dedication into their writing, he or she can make the story powerful and challenging. If a story is hard to write, then a screenplay writer is probably on track; it's not easy work but that's the beauty of it.

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Brandon Stark is currently attending Illinois State University. His major is English with a minor in creative writing. He's a film addict and enjoys having long conversations about film. His passion for film and writing stays strong. He continues to write screenplays and short stories. He hopes to pursue a career in writing. For now, he's focusing on school and waiting to see where life takes him. He personally believes that hard work, real hard work, will take people to the places they want to go.