

Important: Read [this](#) first.

A SCRIPT (SCREENPLAY) “WALK-THROUGH”

Format it EXACTLY like this:

INT. SMALL COURTROOM - DAY

SLUGLINE: THIS ELEMENT ESTABLISHES LOCATION, TIME OF DAY AND, OCCASIONALLY, OTHER EFFECTS SUCH AS INSERT, MONTAGE OR FADE IN.

A late middle aged JUDGE stares at sets of papers before him with sad, sincere eyes. Before him sit David and his lawyer on one side, with Jennifer and her lawyer on the opposite side of the aisle.

ACTION: THIS ELEMENT, IN ITALICS, INCLUDES ALL DESCRIPTIONS OF CHARACTERS, APPEARANCES, LOCATIONS, EVENTS AND ACTIONS. REMEMBER - YOU CAN ONLY INCLUDE IN ACTION WHAT CAN BE SEEN. FILM IS A STRICTLY VISUAL MEDIUM. YOU CANNOT INCLUDE OMNISCIENT NARRATION IN ACTION (ALTHOUGH IF YOU ARE INCLUDING A VOICE OVER, INDICATE IT WITH "V.O".)

David just stares into space, expressionless. He looks haggard and worn. He didn't age, yet he seems older -- his eyes heavier. Jennifer wears all black and constantly fights back tears behind burning eyes.

The judge pushes the papers away:

JUDGE

CHARACTER: THIS ELEMENT SIMPLY INCLUDES A CHARACTER'S NAME. IT IS ALWAYS IN ALL-CAPS AND SITS IN THE CENTER OF THE PAGE.

I've sat in his chair for 13 years. Not as long as some, but long enough to see a hell of a lot of ugliness. But, I never get used to something like this. A husband and wife... driven to divorce by the death of their only son.

DIALOGUE: THIS ELEMENT INCLUDES A CHARACTER'S LINES. IT CAN INCLUDE LINES SPOKEN IN NARRATION OR TO THE CHARACTER ITSELF.

Jennifer lets bitter tears come, but David remains stoic.

JUDGE (cont'd)

WHEN DIALOGUE IS INTERRUPTED BY ACTION, THE CHARACTER'S NAME SHOULD WEAR A "CONT'D."

My heart goes out to both of you for the loss of young Eddie.

(beat)

PARENTHETICAL: THIS ELEMENT SHOULD SUGGEST A READ FOR THE SPECIFIC LINE OF DIALOGUE FOLLOWING IT. A WRITER CAN SUGGEST EMPHASIS, EMOTION OR PACING. ("BEAT" MEANS PAUSE A MOMENT).

Your attorneys assure me that you have made every effort to reconcile since the tragedy.

David still does not respond, but his lawyer nods for him. Jennifer looks to her attorney and mirrors his nod to the judge.

JUDGE (cont'd)

Very well. Then I grant the divorce due to irreconcilable differences and approve the separation of the joint estate according to your legal settlement.

Jennifer sobs quietly now. The judge looks to David, who remains silent, expressionless, dead... until a pager beeps on David's belt. He immediately snatches it up, checking the number. David shows the pager to the judge:

DAVID
(suddenly eager)

Your Honor? Please?

The judge seems momentarily stunned by David's sudden enthusiasm, but he motions him permission to leave.

As David stands, he sees the hate and disgust in Jennifer's damp eyes. David hesitates, as if searching for something to say to her...but he simply exits. Jennifer's lawyer looks over to the now sobbing woman, but he can offer no comfort.

EXT. COURTHOUSE - DAY

David rushes out of the building, a cell phone to his ear:

DAVID
Detective Mast, please... Bill?! I got a page from one of the uniforms. Are you mobile?





David rushes to his car, leaving the parking lot with reckless speed.

CUT TO:

TRANSITION: THIS ELEMENT LEADS THE READER TO THE NEXT SCENE AND CAN INCLUDE "CUT TO:", "DISSOLVE TO:", ETC. IT USUALLY PROCEEDS A SLUGLINE.

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TIPS...

-  Scripts for our purposes should run between 15 to 25 pages.
 -  Script title pages should include the title, the short story on which it is based and the writers' names.
 -  Page numbers should occur in the upper right-hand corner of the script pages.
 -  DO NOT forget to indicate the types of MUSIC, LIGHTING, SHOTS (angles, etc.).
- TRANSITIONS and breaks in SCENES and SEQUENCES throughout.

How to write a good short film script

This is an edited extract from Get Your Short Film Funded, Made and Seen, the Shooting People Shorts

This is a short article in which to deal with a big subject: how to write a good script for a short film. Rule number one: there are no hard and fast rules. But, if your aim is to get your film funded, there are definitely some guiding principles that will help to ensure that your project is taken seriously.

Why Am I Making this Film?

No-one makes a living out of writing or directing short films. Most people see short films as a tool for

learning and testing ideas, or a way of demonstrating that they have the talent to do something else. Generally that 'something else' is to make features. Whether you are working alone or as part of a team make sure that the project you are developing plays to your strengths and is achievable within your budget. Don't make an intense character study if you're scared of actors or develop an action story that will require stunts, car chases and special effects if you know you will only have £5K to make it.

What is a short film?

The most important thing to say is that a short isn't a feature film and that it is generally a bad idea to try to squeeze a story you are developing (or have written) as a feature into a short.

Most festivals will accept as a short anything that is under 30 minutes, but many programmers and curators also say that they find it difficult to place longer short films (ones over 20 minutes). If your film is over 20 minutes long it may well need and be able to cope with more characters and a secondary story strand....

Finding the Story

Any kind of dramatic story requires 3 basic elements:

- A world
- A character
- A problem

Short films are no different; you just have less time to establish and develop each element. Most successful short films focus on ONE moment or event in the life of ONE main character. Because of that it is unusual for a short film to take place over a long period of time – it's usually just looking at the immediate build up to and/or consequences of that one event.

The World

Because of the need to establish an instantly recognisable world in order to get on with exploring a character's problem, it can be useful to set your film around a familiar event or ritual: a wedding, a birthday party, the first day at school, tea with stuffy relatives, Christmas Day etc. With a setting of this sort you can take for granted the audience's familiarity with the situation and you have immediately placed your characters into a story world full of barely suppressed emotions, which is always useful for generating dramatic tension and story events. The other advantage to choosing a setting of this sort is that it gives the story a finite time frame. Another popular setting for the short film is the journey. Most short films focus on a pivotal, significant event in the life of the main character so that the story inevitably takes the character on a metaphorical emotional journey and it can work well to use a literal journey as its setting.

The Character & the Problem

The most important questions to ask yourself when you begin to develop your story are:

- Who is the main character?
- What is his or her problem?
- How will the audience recognise the problem?
- Are the stakes high enough?
- Am I telling the story from the best point of view?

The audience must be clear from the outset who the film is about, and they won't be if you aren't. Your main character is the one who has the problem and if there isn't a character in the story with a problem then you don't have a film, or at least not one that will work as a dramatic narrative.

What is driving your main character through the story must be one of the following:

- A want
- A need
- An obligation

And in all cases it must be clear to the audience, even if it isn't to the character, what this is. But what must also be present in the story - and apparent to the audience - is something that is making it hard for the character to pursue his or her want, need or obligation. The fact that something is making it hard is what turns it into a problem and, like we said before, no problem, no film.

Making Problems Manifest to the Audience

The way in which you turn a character's inner problem into the heart of your film and make sure that the audience can SEE it is one of the most important ways that you can demonstrate your skill as a filmmaker and not just as a story-teller. When we're reading books we can be inside a character's head but when we're watching films we need to see characters DOING things that show us what they are thinking and feeling.

Are the Stakes High Enough?

Ensuring that there is something at stake in the story means that the audience can understand what the character stands to lose if he or she does not solve the problem. If the story hinges around a life or death situation then it is clear what is at stake but if it is simply that the car breaks down think about how you set the film up so that the audience knows why it really matters that the character completes this particular journey.

Am I Telling the Story from the Best Point of View?

Think about the story of Cinderella and imagine if you told it with one of the ugly sisters as the main character. You could still make a good story but it would not have a happy ending (in one of the earliest versions of the story the sisters have their eyes pecked out by blackbirds at the end!) and therefore would have a very different meaning – it would function more as a cautionary tale than as a feel-good fairy story.

What Does My Story Mean?

You probably don't set out to write a film with a theme or even with a conscious awareness of what your story means but every story communicates some meaning to the audience. Once you are sure how the story begins and ends then you have a clear indication of its meaning and this will help you make important choices as you refine and develop your script particularly in relation to...

The Tone of the Film

Tone is intimately connected to genre and though genre is less of an issue in shorts than in features it is still important to think about what kind of film you are writing in broad terms.

To summarize so far...

A good short film needs a story in which something happens that has a discernible effect on the main character. All successful short films focus on one moment/event. That moment is likely to be: one of universal significance-- a moment that is of significance to the protagonist (whether s/he knows it at the time)-- one that produces a situation in which the stakes are high for the protagonist.

10 screenwriting insights I wish I'd had 25 years ago

by ALLEN PALMER on JULY 22, 2010

in HERO'S JOURNEY, SCREENWRITING TIPS



Over the last quarter century I've stumbled and lurched my way to some understanding of the screenwriter's craft. As our AFTRS Graduate Certificate of Screenwriting students begin their

journey, I thought I'd share the 10 things I wish I'd know when I started out.

1. [Why people go to the movies](#)
2. [It's not about the plot](#)
3. [The one screenwriting book you'll ever need](#)
4. [The 27-word concept test](#)
5. [The 4 basic questions of storytelling](#)
6. [The secret to character is contradiction](#)
7. [Don't keep your idea a secret](#)
8. [Why sometimes the best way to write is not to write](#)
9. [Get a day job but not just any day job](#)
10. [Choose a producer like you'd choose a spouse](#)

1. Why people go to the movies

If you're making films to be viewed by the cinema-going public, it would seem pretty obvious that you should seek to understand why people go the movies, wouldn't it? Not to me. I scratched around for about 6 years and had already written several very poor drafts of my first screenplay without ever contemplating this fundamental question. Fortunately, the inspirational UCLA English Professor, Lynn Batten, forced me to address the question – well, not so much about movies but about stories and myths in general. Why do humans need cracking yarns? Joseph Campbell's *The Power of Myth* supplied the answer.

“What people are seeking is the feeling of being alive. They want to feel the rapture of being alive”.

They want to be moved, guys. They want to identify with a character who's struggling, as they are, with the exquisitely frustrating dilemma of life, and who, in facing their greatest fear, draws on their higher self. In my darkest hour in LA, this epiphany transformed my writing.

[Learn more about why people go to the movies](#)

2. It's not about the plot

Most writers starting out think story is plot and when you ask them to tell you about their film they'll go, "Well, this happens, and that happens, and then this other things happens, and oh, and I forgot to tell you, there's this three-legged dog who can talk ... "

However, once you understand that people want to be moved, you should realise that the main game in story is not plot. It's not the outer goal that ultimately triggers our emotions but the inner journey. That's not to say that the outer goal doesn't matter. It does. It's what gets the punters into the cinema in the first place. But if the hero pursues the outer goal with no inner change, no matter how spectacular your climax, no matter how many bodies or cars or interplanetary spaceships you lay to waste in that final 20 pages and no matter how eloquent that 3-legged dog is, we won't be moved one jot. Plot matters but only because it's what drives the inner transformation. Plot isn't the end. It's just the means.

3. The only screenwriting book you'll ever need

Blake Snyder bills his book, *Save The Cat*, as "the last book on screenwriting you'll ever need". This is categorically NOT the book to which I refer. *Save The Cat* has some useful things to say about concept but I'm not sure that it encourages writers to create films with soul.

McKee is treated like a screenwriting God. His expensive lectures are sold out and his book *Story* is only marginally less popular than the Bible. Unfortunately, what he says about screenwriting simply doesn't resonate for me. By all means, check it out but the emotional journey isn't emphasised sufficiently for my liking.

If you are to only buy one book about screenwriting, please, please, let it be Chris Vogler's *The Writer's Journey*.

Vogler, a Hollywood story analyst who's consulted on films like *Lion King*, takes the [Hero's Journey](#) of mythology guru, [Joseph Campbell](#), and makes it both accessible to the average

person and relevant specifically to the movies. It categorically changed my life.

There are 3 reasons why I love the Hero's Journey and consider it the most useful story paradigm for screenwriters.

i) It was not invented. It was merely identified. Joseph Campbell read stories from all over the world, across all time, and found that every culture was telling the same story over and over and over again. The monomyth. The hero's journey is not the get-rich-quick gimmick of some San Fernando Valley shyster. It's the timeless storytelling blueprint of all humankind.

ii) The inner journey is intrinsic. I said the inner journey is what it's all about and if you subscribe to the Hero's Journey you can't not have your character go on an inner journey. The Hero's Journey doesn't so much describe plot elements as identity stages in the transformation of your character. Become a Campbell/Vogler devotee, and your focus will shift automatically from plot to emotion. And that, my friends, is where it's at.

iii) It works. It's worked for the great films – even if the writers weren't aware they were following its conventions. It's worked for George Lucas – who consulted Campbell on the early Star Wars films. It's worked for [George Miller](#). George is a huge Campbell fan and it's no coincidence that he's been Australia's most successful filmmaker on the international stage. It's worked for millions of storytellers for thousands of years so there's a good chance it might just work for you.

If you haven't got this book, buy it. If you haven't read it, pick it up and see how it applies to the films you love. And if you want to spend a day exploring this amazing gift, come to my [Introduction to Screenwriting course](#). The Hero's Journey is the foundation to everything I teach.

Update: You might be interested in these 2 more recent articles about the Hero's Journey:

[Where I disagree with the Hero's Journey – on character arc](#)

[A new character-driven Hero's Journey](#)

4. The 27-word concept test

One of the most useful courses I did in LA was not a screenwriting class but a script reader's class with seasoned story analyst, Peter Exline (who, incidentally, was one of the inspirations for *The Dude in The Big Lebowski*). In that course, I learnt 2 incredibly valuable lessons and one was the 27 word concept test.

Some people say that a logline – the description of the film's concept – can be 2 or 3 sentences. Exline placed a much tighter constraint on the logline. He said it should be just one sentence of 27 words.

Film demands simple ideas. Complex plots but simple ideas. If you can't express your idea in a single sentence of 27 words, you're going to struggle on two grounds:

- i) You probably won't be able to tell your story in 110 pages
- ii) The marketing department will have the devil's own job in trying to market your film.

The 27-word concept test interrogates the dramatic engine of your film and is just about the most valuable tool in the screenwriter's toolkit. Use it early. And use it often.

[Learn more about the 27-word film concept test](#)

5. The 4 basic questions of storytelling

The other piece of gold I picked up in Peter Exline's class was that there are 4 basic questions a

screenwriter should be able to answer about their story:

1. Who is the hero?
2. What do they want?
3. What's stopping them from getting it?
4. What's at stake?

This might seem obvious to you but it was a revelation to me and I can tell you that 90% screenplays fail these basic tests. It's not clear whose story it is, the goal isn't distinguished in a way that will allow us to know when they've crossed the finish line, the forces of antagonism aren't great enough or it doesn't matter enough to the character so why should we care?

These elements shouldn't just be obvious in your overall story but in each scene. Who wants what in this scene and why? Who is stopping them trying to get it and how do they thwart our hero?

Without these elements, you don't have conflict. No conflict, no drama. No drama, no chance of screenwriting glory.

[Learn more about the 4 basic questions of storytelling](#)

6. The secret to character is contradiction

In our first class of Dramatic Storytelling in the Grad Cert last week, we watched the opening scene of The Godfather and I asked my writers, why do we find the Don engaging and one of the first things someone said was, "The cat". Spot on. The mafia boss is stroking a cat.

Now, antagonists in James Bond and Austin Powers films have given cat-stroking a bad rap, but what was the intention of the writer here with this touch of domesticity? To provide a counterpoint to the expectations of the stereotype. It's a contradiction and it's the key to great characterisation.

Think about Indiana Jones. Dashing, brave, handsome, fearless. Well, not quite. He's not too keen on snakes. Contradiction.

Tony Soprano. Brutal, murderous, brothel-keeping, drug running mafioso? Yes. But in episode 1 his character crisis is triggered because a family of ducks no longer comes to his backyard swimming pool. Contradiction.

And this is not just something that applies to heroes. Think about Anton Sugar (Javier Bardem) in No Country for Old Men. What makes him one of the great antagonists? Not just that he blows people away with that weird gas cylinder weapon. It's that, when he fears that the guy in the remote truck stop might compromise him, he gives the poor sap a sporting chance. He flips a coin. Heads you win, tails you get a cross city tunnel through your cerebral cortex. He also intrigues us because he has an unbreakable ethical code. He said he is going to kill the guy's wife so kill her he must. He's a psychopath but he's a highly principled psychopath.

Here are some others:

Hannibal Lecter – Cultured cannibal

Harry Burns in When Harry Met Sally – Romantic pessimist

Sally Allbright in When Harry Met Sally – Pragmatic optimist

Ronny Cammareri (Nic Cage) in Moonstruck – Opera-loving baker

Shrek – Sentimental ogre

The key to characterisation is credibly building these sorts of opposites into your characters. It stops them being clichés and helps the audience warm to them because no matter how great they are, they're flawed like us, and no matter how bad they are, they have redeeming qualities,

like we do on a good day.

7. Don't keep your idea a secret

Australian screenwriters are very secretive about their film concepts. What's your film about? I can't tell you that!!! Go to LA and try to STOP someone telling you their idea. Not just writers in your UCLA Extension class, but the guy at the sandwich shop or the barmaid at Hooters. They constantly pitch their ideas and this is something I would encourage you to do too.

The danger with keeping your idea to yourself "until it's finished" is that your idea, with all due respect, might be crap. If you're a writer just starting out, they generally are. It's just the way it is. Mine was crap and I wasted years of my life drafting and redrafting it because I didn't bounce it off anyone.

The other reason you should verbally tell your story to people in the early stages is because you can tell as the words are coming out of your mouth whether it's working or not. You don't need their glazed reaction to know you've got yourself a stinker or to hear their "so what happens next" to know you're on a winner. You just know through some hard-wired storytelling instinct.

This is one place where I absolutely agree with Blake Snyder. Bounce your idea off people as soon as you can. If it's not working, try to reshape it. If they still say, "Yeah, it's ... nice" then trash it and find a fresh vehicle to transport your genius to the world.

Read more about [Why writers should take the oral before the written](#)

8. Why sometimes the best way to write is not to write

The worst mistake a writer can make is to not write – to sit down at your desk only when you feel "inspired". You need to create a regimen and stick to it. If you can only manage 30 mins a day, OK, but make sure you put in that half hour no matter what. There should be no excuse. Work. Kids. Alien invasion. If you have the conviction, you'll find the time. My routine at the moment is to get up at 5.30am, which doesn't sound too appealing but your body quickly adjusts

and I now automatically wake up at that time. Just ask my wife.

But the next mistake you can make is to think you will only solve that problem at the Act 2 Turning Point by continuing to wrestle with it on the page. You're exhausted and cranky but you are not going to give in 'til you've found the answer. Bad move.

Do you do cryptic crosswords? I love them. But one of the amazing things I've found is that something I might struggle with when I look at it on Friday morning is bleedingly bloody obvious at Friday lunchtime. Why? Because my subconscious has had time to work on it. It's the same with your screenplay.

Your mind is an amazing bit of gear but you've got to start learning how to get the most out of it. And that's not by pounding it into submission. You need to become aware of the moment when it's ceased to be productive and back off. Go for a swim or walk the dog. Go play the piano, guitar, or, in my case, plastic recorder. Do yoga or meditate. I'm amazed at the number of times the solution will come to me when I'm not looking for the solution. I'll be running around the park and I'll suddenly find myself seeing the answer and come out of the trance with no recollection of how many laps I've done.

Your brain is a gift. And sometimes it does its best work when it seems not to be working at all.

9. Get a day job. But not just any day job.

Even if you are the greatest writer in the world, it's going to take you time to develop your craft and – here's the problem – no-one is going to pay you to learn your trade. There were very few screenwriting apprenticeships available down at Centrelink the last time I looked. So before you can face the challenges of screenwriting in general and your current film in particular, you need to answer a more fundamental question: how am I going to support myself while I learn my craft?

I've tried every possible approach. For a long time I took incredibly poorly paid jobs that offered great time flexibility (hostel manager in NY, pizza cook in Ireland, housekeeper to a countess in

London). On the plus side, you get a lot of writing done but on the down side, you make enormous personal and social sacrifices. You tell yourself that it's only until I finish this next draft and then all of a sudden you're 43, single with no assets, no super and about \$20k in debt.

The other approach is to try to write while holding down a real job. On the plus side, you don't hide when the landlord knocks and you can afford a loaf of bread without having to search for gold coloured coins down the back of the sofa. On the down side, the responsibilities and stress mean your writing is too often sidelined and years go by without you making any meaningful progress.

The best option I've found after years of trial and error is well-paid freelance work. Copywriting for instance. If you're good – and you won't be without practice – you can make \$100/hr and sometimes \$1000 a day so that you don't need to work 5 days to earn a decent crust. If you have some skill that allows you to earn a lot of money in a short time on a flexible basis, you can create the window you need in your life to develop your craft. If not, you will be faced with a choice: do I want lifestyle or do I really desperately want to be a writer? That's a question only you can answer.

10. Choose a producer like you'd choose a spouse

When you've finally written your screenplay and you find a producer who says that they love it and they want to option it, your response is, "Where do I sign?", right? Wrong. Oh, so, very wrong.

The writer-producer relationship is like a marriage. Only more important. It's probably going to take your producer 3 years to get your film up and possibly a whole lot longer. Producer Vincent Sheehan just got funding approval for a film he started on 8 years ago. That is a long time, particularly when people are poking and prodding around inside something very near and dear to you. If you choose the wrong producer, the development process will drive you absolutely insane and your baby will end up mutilated or murdered. I myself have been through this nightmare scenario and it almost made me quit the game.

Choose a producer who knows one end of a story from the other and who obeys the first commandment of the writer-producer collaborative process – that it's the producer's job to identify what's not working and the writer's job to fix it. It's amazing the number of producers who will tell you, "Well, I'm not a writer but ..." and then proceed to dictate (literally) what they expect to see in the next draft. That's a recipe for a bad relationship and a tragic script outcome.

The pitfalls where producers are concerned don't stop there. They might be wonderful collaborators but that same sensitivity might make them lousy at getting your project read by the people that matter. Producing, ultimately, is selling. Of course, on the flip side, great salesmen throughout history haven't generally been renowned for their ethics.

Am I scaring you? Good. Make the wrong choice here and all your talent and hard work could end up counting for nought.

So don't hook up with the first producer who asks you out. Research the market and find answers to these questions:

- What have they made?
- Do you like what they've made?
- Did it tell a good story?
- Have they made a film that's done business internationally?
- Do writers like to work with them creatively?
- Do they have a habit of screwing writers contractually?

Play hard to get. Of course, in order to play hard to get, you have to have produced a screenplay that gleams. But when you have labored and sweated to produce that rare entity, don't give it to just any clown. Take some time and confer it on someone who's going to give your screenplay its best chance to delight and move the world. Sign in haste. Repent at leisure.

Conclusion

So that's it. That's not all I've learned. I hope. But these are the 10 things that would have made the greatest difference to my career trajectory if someone had told me them all those years ago. I

hope that by getting the tips now, you can fast-track your path to screenwriting fulfilment.