FADE IN: A Guide to Screenwriting Basics

FADE IN: A Guide to Screenwriting Basics

CANDACE ROSE

Introduction

A Guide to Screenwriting Basics

Welcome to *FADE IN: A Guide to Screenwriting Basics*—a practical, engaging resource designed for screenwriting and film production instructors, students, and aspiring writers alike. Whether you're writing your first short film or dreaming up the next feature-length screenplay, this guide walks you step-by-step through the fundamentals of screenwriting with clarity and encouragement. From crafting compelling characters to mastering the three-act structure, you'll find practical tools, creative exercises, and real-world examples to help you develop your voice as a screenwriter. Rooted in years of classroom experience, this book is built to support both teaching and independent study—so open to FADE IN, and let your screenwriting journey begin.

Candace Rose

Table of Contents

The Left Brain vs the Right Brain

As you probably know, the left brain is associated with linear and analytical thought. The right brain, on the other hand, is associated with creative and intuitive thought, and we have both a left and right hemisphere in our brain. Screenwriting incorporates both the analytical mind and the creative mind. The left brain helps us to structure our screenplay and the right brain helps us to develop our characters, our dialogue, and picture our worlds. We may be stronger in one hemisphere over the other, but these parts of our brain can be developed with practice.

Know your strengths and keep this in mind when going through the screenwriting process. For example, if you are more of a left-brain thinker, you may find that structuring your story comes easily to you and you enjoy thinking through the plot points. On the other hand, you may struggle to know your characters and hear their voices. No worries...with practice your right brain will kick in and your characters will come to life.

The same is true for the right brain thinkers who can barely turn their characters' voices off at night. Structure might be a grueling task for you and you wonder why you can't just let your characters tell you where they want to go next. You can try this approach, but after two hundred pages of script with no end in sight, you may decide that engaging your left brain to step up and structure your screenplay is the way to go.

What is a Screenplay for?

This may seem like an obvious question, especially if you are already somewhat familiar with how movies are made. A screenplay is the written “story” created in the early “development” phase of a film project. It’s the document that is used to get producers, directors, actors and financiers onboard so the movie can be greenlit.

Once the movie is financed, the film moves from development to the preproduction phase, and now the script becomes a map or guide for the crew as to how the movie should be made. At this point, the director and other key creatives, such as the production designer and cinematographer, will have a hand in crafting the movie and some changes will most likely be made to the script. The writer will typically get to do at least one rewrite on the project and may even stay on through the entire production of the film to make last minute changes to the script.

Chapter 1: Where Do You Find a Good Story?

Coming up with a good story idea is the first step to developing your screenplay. It can be a fun, creative process, and sometimes it can be a daunting one too...but it doesn't have to be. Hitchcock once said, "Drama is life with the dull bits cut out." And he was right! Story ideas are all around us – in our news, our families, our own personal life experiences.

So where to begin? Here are some ideas to ignite your creativity, and remember, it's a process. Let the process take its time and don't be too concerned if your perfect screenplay idea doesn't just suddenly appear. In fact, I recommend coming up with several screenplay ideas to take the pressure off and give yourself some creative choices.

Check out news headlines and don't read the articles. Just let the headlines inspire you to create your own story, characters and conflicts.

Listen to music and let the melodies and/or lyrics take you away to another place.

Visit locations where your story could take place. Immerse yourself physically into your story.

People watch and be the "fly on the wall." Great characters are believable characters, and what better place to draw from than from real life.

Watch movies...lots of them. Discover what you love and don't love about certain films and what kinds of stories you'd like to tell.

Read screenplays! Not only is this a fantastic way to improve your writing skills, but you'll get some creative story ideas as well.

Write down your dreams. Sometimes our subconscious comes up with amazing imagery and storylines that can inspire a character or storyline.

Get busy. Sitting in front of an empty computer screen or blank sheet of paper can spiral us into writer's block. Walk your dog, exercise, garden or meditate...any activity that helps both your mind and body relax to get those creative juices flowing again.

Research. If you love to learn random facts about all kinds of things, then research is your key to finding inspiration for new and exciting worlds and characters.

Interview interesting people. Most people would love to tell you their story if asked. And this is also a great way to learn about different professions and expertise, whether that be deep-sea diving, trading stock on Wall Street or delivering babies.

Tips for writing a Short Screenplay

Both feature length and short screenplays have their unique challenges. Writing a feature requires many plot

twists and turns, multiple characters and subplots. When writing a short screenplay, however, you are limited on what you can include in your story.

Here are a few tips to help you formulate your ideas for a short screenplay:

Focus the story around just one or two characters.

Give the protagonist one clear goal and clear obstacles.

Make sure there's a clear and worthy antagonist and force against the protagonist.

Limit the number of locations.

Keep the timeframe short – in other words, a story that takes place over an hour or a day is much easier to tell in 10 – 20 pages than a story that spans decades.

Limit the number of subplots.

Does it take place in another reality? If so, write out the "rules" of this reality to avoid plot holes.

Watch short films to get a sense of the timing in a short screenplay.

Here's an example of a Writing Exercise that you can use to help spark creative story ideas from a News Headline, but you can adapt this exercise to inspire ideas from any source.

ADAPTING A NEWS HEADLINE FOR A SCREENPLAY

Choose a newspaper headline (or combine headlines) and follow the example below. Write out the headline(s) at the top of the page. Then complete each category below with a brief paragraph, no more than 4 or 5 sentences. The goal is to be clear and concise.

ARTICLE HEADLINE: "Lottery ticket bought with stolen credit card – $1 million ticket purchased with card that belonged to dead person" MSNBC.com

1. PREMISE: (include the 4 points from the premise chapter 2)

Darcy buys a million dollar lottery ticket and wins! But in the midst of living the glorious high-life, her world skids to a halt when a jealous sister-in-law turns her in for fraud and for "borrowing" the card from her dead mother-in-law. Now Darcy must find a way to keep the fortune for herself and away from her greedy siblings.

2. MAIN CHARACTER: Darcy is a middle-aged woman with mediocre success in her life. She lives next door to her now dead mother-in-law despite the fact that her husband has been missing for the last 14 years. It was a complicated, love-hate relationship between the two women. Her day of passing couldn't have come too soon for Darcy.

3. MAIN CHARACTER'S GOAL: Darcy's goal is to keep her winning fortune.

4. OBSTACLES (be very specific/imagine a scene in a movie):

Greedy siblings take Darcy to TV court.

Darcy is slandered with bad publicity and her history of dirty laundry is broadcast on the prime time news.

Darcy is blackmailed by her suddenly resurrected missing husband and she's forced to pay him off.

Darcy is arrested and she must explain other stolen items purchased with the same borrowed credit card to city police.

Mobsters discover Darcy hiding her fortune in the desert and decide to make it their own – they happen to be burying a dead body in the same location.

5. CENTRAL QUESTION(S): Will Darcy get caught or get to keep the fortune? And will she share the wealth or keep it for herself?

6. POSSIBLE THEMES:

1. Money can't buy happiness.

2. Greed will stab you in the back.

Worksheet

ARTICLE HEADLINE:

1. PREMISE: (include the 4 points – use Premise handout)

2. MAIN CHARACTER: (creative description)

3. MAIN CHARACTER'S GOAL:

4. OBSTACLES: (give details – describe actual scenes)

1.

2.

3.

4.

5. CENTRAL QUESTION:

6. POSSIBLE THEMES:

7. GENRE:

Chapter 2: The Premise

A Premise is your story narrowed down to just one or two sentences. Once you establish this, you can set out to develop your plot. Being able to narrow your story down to its bare bones is challenging but essential when telling your story. It's also great practice for the "elevator pitch" when you only have one minute to impress someone with your amazing screenplay idea.

Your premise should include the following, and leave out the subplots and complications:

Name the hero/protagonist

What does the hero want?

What prevents/tries to prevent the hero from getting it?

How does it end/wrap up?

Here's an example from the movie *ET (1982)* by writer Melissa Mathison and director Stephen Spielberg:

A boy discovers a visitor from outer space who misses his spaceship home. He enlists the help of his siblings who befriend the alien and help him escape before he dies.

This can be broken down into the following four premise points:

Name the hero/protagonist – A boy who discovers a visitor from outer space

What does the hero want? – to help the alien go home

What prevents/tries to prevent the hero from getting it? – the alien misses his spaceship and is dying, and authorities try to intervene

How does it end/wrap up? – the children help him escape

Another example from *Creed (2015)* by writers Ryan Coogler, Aaron Covington with characters from the Rocky series by Slyvester Stallone and director Ryan Coogler:

A young man follows in his father's footsteps to become a boxing champion and seeks out his father's former opponent and eventual friend to coach him. But after discovering that his mentor has cancer and he loses his girl, he is forced to overcome his own doubts and limitations in order to succeed and prove himself worthy of his father's name.

Name the hero/protagonist – A young man (Adonis Creed)

What does the hero want? – He wants to be a boxing champion and live up to his father's name

What prevents/tries to prevent the hero from getting it? – He loses a fight, doubts himself, his mentor gets cancer, he loses his girlfriend

How does it end/wrap up? – He proves himself worthy

And an example from *Get Out (2017)* by writer/director Jordan Peele:

An African American man travels with his caucasion girlfriend to meet her parents for the first time. What

starts out as an awkward attempt to impress her parents and fit in, turns into a fight for his life against racism, family secrets and sinister motives.

Name the hero/protagonist – An African American man (Chris Washington)

What does the hero want? – He wants to be accepted by his girlfriend's parents

What prevents/tries to prevent the hero from getting it? – Racism and the family's secrets and sinister motives

How does it end/wrap up? – He fights for his life

One more example from *Wonder Woman (2017)* by writer Allan Heinberg and director Patty Jenkins:

A trained Amazon warrior princess is called to action to save the world from a devastating world war along with the help of an American pilot, and in doing so, she discovers her true powers and destiny.

Name the hero/protagonist – A trained Amazon warrior princess (Diana)

What does the hero want? – To save the world

What prevents/tries to prevent the hero from getting it? – A devastating world war

How does it end/wrap up? – She discovers her true powers and destiny

Chapter 3: Screenplay Structure

The Three-Act Structure

Movie screenplays are typically written in a 3-act structure, summarized as:

> Act one, throw your character in the sea
>
> Act two, surround him with sharks
>
> Act three, pull him to safety

One page of script equals one minute of screen-time (1:1 ratio), so a standard two hour movie or a 20-minute short film is roughly broken down into the following three time/page acts:

Each act has plot points that occur at very specific times in the script. Memorize these! These important points are detailed below.

ACT 1	ACT 2	ACT 3
Approx 30 min in a 2-hr feature film	Approx 60 min in a 2-hr feature film	Approx 30 min in a 2-hr feature film
or 5 min in a 20-min short film	or 10 min in a 20-min short film	or 5 min in a 20-min short film

Act One

Act one establishes the “real world” and embarks our hero on their journey.

The Set-Up

This occurs within the first 10 to 15 minutes of a feature-length movie (1 to 3 minutes of a 20-minute short film) and sets up the story. It establishes the “real world” and throws an obstacle at the Hero that is nearly impossible to overcome. The Set-up:

Introduces the Hero/Protagonist and other key characters

Establishes the setting

Reveals the time period

Defines the genre

Reveals a character's socio-economic status

Sets up the Central Question

The Central Question

This is a "story" or plot question, not a thematic one. It is a straightforward question that you are asking within the first 15 minutes of a feature-length movie (or within 3 minutes of a 20-minute short film) that is answered by the Climax of the film.

It is the "What is this movie about?" question that helps you decide whether or not to settle in and watch this movie or change the channel. For example: Will they find their true love? Will she take control of her life and be a winner? Will he find the missing child? Will they save the world from impending destruction? Will she get revenge?

The Catalyst/Inciting Incident

This is the moment that something happens to set the story in motion. It's a problem, challenge or incident that could come in the form of dialogue or action that demands an action or reaction from our main character. This usually occurs about 15 minutes into a feature-length movie (3 minutes into a 20-minute short film.)

The First Turning Plot Point

In a feature-length movie, the 1st turning point occurs around 25 to 35 minutes in (4 to 6 minutes into a 20-minute short film.) This turning point should accomplish the following:

Turn the story in a new direction

Sets up Act 2

Raises the stakes

Re-asks the Central Question – in possibly a new way or with a different outcome

The Protagonist makes a decision

Act Two

Act Two is the main body of the movie where you get to raise the stakes and challenge your hero at every turn. In

this act you develop your story idea, characters, subplots and relationships. This is where relationships blossom, characters grow and the plot thickens.

The Midpoint

This is a significant point in the movie that mirrors or reflects the ending, and it happens halfway through the film. If the movie ends on a high point, the midpoint might also be a high point, or sometimes it can be the direct opposite of the ending.

The Second Turning Point

The 2nd Turning Point occurs about 75 to 90 minutes into a feature film (14 – 16 minutes in a 20-minute short film.) This can be the darkest hour in the movie when things look hopeless. This turning point should accomplish the following:

Turn the direction of the story again

Raise the stakes again

Start a ticking clock that launches us towards the Climax

Asks the Central Question again

The Protagonist makes a decision

Act Three

This act includes a "ticking clock," which is the "race to the finish line," where your hero is faced with her greatest challenge and you get to wrap up the loose ends. This act should be no more than 30 minutes.

The Climax

This is the final and biggest conflict where the good guy faces off with the bad guy or two lovers finally get together. It's the "race to the finish line" – the moment when the Central Question is answered.

The Conclusion

This is where the loose ends and subplots wrap up in the last 5 to 10 minutes of a feature-length movie (1 to 2 minutes of a 20-minute short film.)

Theme

What is your story *really* about? What are you saying? Themes are the messages or implicit meanings in the movie that the audience can take away with them. Here are a few examples:

Love always wins in the end, do the right thing and justice will be served, the underdog can come out on top, families stick together no matter what, or life is pointless.

THE PARADIGM 3-ACT STRUCTURE

On the next two pages, I offer a blank Paradigm worksheet that you can use to help break down your screenplay into its 3-Act structure, as well as a worksheet that I've filled in based on the Screenplay for *Creed (2015)* to use as an example.

Chapter 4: Scene Cards

After structuring your screenplay into it's 3 acts with the major plot points and filling in your Paradigm, you are ready to move on to the next step of building your screenplay, the Scene Cards. This is a fun part of the process because it's hands-on and gets you out of your seat.

As the name implies, each scene of your screenplay is written down on a card: one card = one scene. I find that 3×5 cards work best, although you may prefer to use large sticky notes, or a screenwriting software program that offers a scene card option. Whatever works for you.

Creating Your Cards

#1 Start with a pile of blank cards and include some "free" cards labeled: title, ACT 1, ACT 2, ACT 3.

#2 Keep the information on your cards brief. Include the scene heading, which indicates whether or not the scene is interior INT. or exterior EXT., the location and either DAY or NIGHT. Then briefly describe the action and name the characters in the scene. If the scene is one of the major plot points indicated on your Paradigm worksheet, then include that heading as well.

For example, a scene card from the movie *Creed (2015)* might look like this:

MIDPOINT

INT. RING – DAY

Adonis fights Leo and wins.

Rocky is in his corner.

Bianca watches and congratulates Adonis after the fight.

#3 Start filling in your individual cards with the major plot points from your Paradigm worksheet. Remember, each card is a single scene, and a scene is defined by *time* or *location*. For example, if a scene takes place inside of a restaurant at night, the scene heading would look like this:

INT. RESTAURANT – NIGHT

If the characters then walk outside the restaurant, even if you imagine it as one continuous shot with no break in time, it is still a new scene, because now the characters are technically in a new location, and on a film set, this would be a new set up. So the new scene heading would look like this:

EXT. RESTAURANT – NIGHT

This new location indicates a new scene, and thus you would use a new scene card.

The same is true for time. If a scene starts out in a restaurant at night, and the next scene is several hours later in the same restaurant, even though the location has not changed, time has lapsed. The new scene heading would look like this:

INT. RESTAURANT – LATER

Again, this would require a new scene card because technically it's a new scene and set up.

#4 After writing out the major plot points onto your scene cards, now you can move on to other imaginative scenes that you'd like to see in your movie. At this point, don't worry about being linear and working from the beginning of your movie to the end in sequential order. It's perfectly fine and even helpful sometimes to work out of sequence and just allow your creativity to flow. The great thing about scene cards is that you get to move them around, so at this point, nothing is locked in.

This is also your time to fill in the subplots. *Subplots* are story threads that often involve relationships and supporting storylines. In a 20-minute short screenplay, you may only have one or two subplots or no subplots. The story may just be about the through-line that focuses only on the protagonist reaching his or her goal. In a feature film, however, you will have many subplots and these will help you fill up the second act.

You can use a marker or sticker to add a colored dot to the corner of your scene card that indicates a subplot storyline. This is an easy way to keep track of subplots visually as you look over your cards.

Laying Out Your Cards

Next, start laying out your cards across a table in columns, starting with the first act in the upper left corner and then working your way down the column with each scene card, and then starting at the top again. Lay the cards in order from beginning to end, sectioning off the different acts with your ACT 1, ACT 2 and ACT 3 "free" cards.

For a feature-length screenplay, you should have between 45 – 60 cards. On average, a scene lasts about 2 pages, so this would equate to a 90 -120 page screenplay. For a 20 minute short screenplay you should have about 8 – 15 cards, as some scenes will be much shorter than 2 pages.

This technique of laying out your scene cards will give you a visual of where your story is at. For example, if you discover that you have 30 of your 60 cards in Act 1, you know right away that your first act is way too long. The same goes for a short film. If your first act includes 6 of your 10 cards, you will need to cut that down or rearrange some scenes.

Remember, this is a creative, fluid process, so don't worry if you don't have all of the pieces to your screenplay puzzle yet. You may discover that you have a great opening and ending to your screenplay but your second act could use a few more scene cards and exciting obstacles for your protagonist to overcome. Now is the time to try some things out. Come up with some new scenes, plug them in and see if they work. Rearrange some scenes and see how that changes your story – sometimes it may be for the better.

This is also a good time to "talk" someone through your movie. Sometimes hearing yourself tell your story out loud will spark some creative ideas and help you figure out that perfect next-step for your screenplay.

I also recommend using a pencil and numbering your scene cards just in case your cat decides to check out your scene cards, and they scatter to the floor. This way you'll be able to easily pick up where you left off, and if you change your mind, you can erase the numbers and start over.

Some writers really enjoy the scene card process, and can move from here straight into writing their screenplay. Others will move from this step on to the Outline/Treatment, which is a much more detailed breakdown of each

scene, before they dive into writing. And some writers skip this step all together and go straight to the Outline/ Treatment from their Paradigm.

I recommend going through all of these steps as you learn to write a screenplay and come to better understand your own creative process and what works best for you.

Chapter 5: Subplots

Subplots are storylines that interweave with the protagonist's storyline, which is also known as the A-Story or through-line.

Subplots support the main plot, revolve around the supporting characters, and can add to the complications and rising conflict that our hero must overcome. They are often referred to as the B-Story, C-Story and so forth.

If a subplot can be cut from the story, and not affect the A-Story at all, then it's time to either lose it, or make it count and tie it into the main character's storyline.

Subplots should also have at least 3 beats – just like the main storyline – a beginning, middle and an end. Although the timespan of a subplot can be much shorter than the A-Story, spanning over just a few scenes or one or two acts.

Thematically, subplots should align with the A-Story. If a major theme in your A-Story is "Love wins in the end" then you don't want a subplot with a theme of "Love never lasts."

A subplot should also match the A-Story in tone and exist in the same reality. A gritty police drama with a subplot that suddenly jumps into a fantasy world of dragons could be jarring for the audience and lose it's believability.

Of course, I'm sure you can find examples of movies where the "rules" of screenwriting were broken – and it worked! But for now, when learning the craft, learn the rules, practice the rules and stick with the rules. And once you've mastered them, you can get creative and start writing "outside of the box."

In the movie *Creed (2015),* for example, the A-Story is Adonis' journey to becoming a boxing champion. The B-Story is his relationship with Rocky, the C-Story his love relationship with Bianca, etc.

Chapter 6: Treatment Outline

A Treatment Outline is the next tool that I use after the Scene Cards, to help refine and clarify the story. This is an important next step, and essentially the "road map" that you will follow when you finally sit down to write your screenplay.

A Treatment Outline also allows me, the instructor, to analyze your story outline and give you valuable feedback to help you fix any "plot holes," weak or missing turning points, slow pacing and even missing character arcs before you start your first draft.

This essentially forces you, the writer, to think through your entire story in a present tense, narrative format, so that when you sit down to write your screenplay, the "left brain" work of structuring the story is done, allowing the "right brain" to step in and get to work.

Here are the elements to include in your Treatment Outline:

Finished Treatment Outline should be about 3-4 pages long

It MUST BE TYPED using 12 font

Write in present tense only

Each scene card will be written as one or more paragraphs in your treatment

Leave a double space between each paragraph

Label your paragraphs:

OPENING

INCITING INCIDENT/CATALYST

IST TURNING POINT

MIDPOINT

2ND TURNING POINT

CLIMAX

RESOLUTION/CONCLUSION

Your Treatment Outline, should include *more details than your scene cards* and include the following:

Scene Heading – Location & Time – Day or Night (example: INT. BOXING RING – DAY)

Include/name all characters in the scene

Goal or purpose of the scene

Important details, clues or lines of dialogue

What decision does the character make (1st and 2nd Turning Point cards)

A sample scene card from the movie *Creed (2015)* might look like this:

MIDPOINT

INT. BOXING RING – DAY

Adonis fights Leo and wins.

Rocky is in his corner.

Bianca watches and congratulates Adonis after the fight.

Here is an EXAMPLE of how that Scene Card might be translated into the Treatment Outline:

MIDPOINT

INT. BLUE HORIZON – RING – DAY

Adonis readies himself for the fight. Rocky coaches Adonis from the corner, assuring him that this is what he's been waiting for, and he's there for him. The Referee sounds the bell and the fight begins. Bianca watches from the stands.

Adonis squares up with his opponent. Leo comes in hard and for a moment it looks like Leo is getting the upper hand, but Adonis pulls out the stops and takes him down with one powerful, right hook. Leo is down and Adonis wins the fight.

Chapter 7: Manipulating Time

The manipulation of time is one handy tool that screenwriters can use to span hours, days, years or even decades in a screenplay. The run-time of the movie might be 10 min or 2 hours, but the plot-duration can take place over any amount of time imaginable.

When writing a short screenplay, it's best to limit the plot duration to a shorter amount of time. I recommend no more than a few days, or even better, see if you can get your story to take place over a few hours or less. This will keep your story compact and energized.

Narrative devices to manipulate time:

Flashback

The flashback is a device to give the audience information to clarify a character's motives and actions and move the story along. Nonlinear screenplays, such a Charlie Kaufman's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004)* or Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction (1994)* use flashbacks to either reflect the mental and emotional state of a character or to reveal details of clever set-ups and payoffs that keep the audience guessing.

Flashforward

Similar to a flashback, a flashforward gives us a glimpse of "what is to come" for a character. It hooks the audience, by showing us a scene from later in the movie – and of course, we're along for the ride to figure out how she gets there.

Set-Up/Payoff

This device introduces a subtle character trait, line of dialogue, object, clue, or story point that later returns with an "ah-ha" moment or reveal for the audience that has a significance to the storyline. It's a great tool to add mystery, suspense, humor, and intrigue to your screenplay.

It's the moment when the audience says "I didn't see that coming" but upon further reflection (and usually after rewinding or re-watching the movie) realizes that this "clue" was there in plain sight all along.

Montage

A montage is a series of short scenes, with no dialogue, that play out over a musical background. It's a useful device to span a period of time in a matter of seconds or minutes on the screen.

Typically a montage expresses a single concept or idea, such as falling in love, getting a new job, searching for a missing person, training for the big fight, etc.

Series of Shots

Although typically you want to limit camera direction in your screenplay and leave that to the director and cinematographer, using a Series of Shots, similar to Montage, can relay a great deal of exposition (necessary information to move the story along) in a very short amount of time.

It differs from a Montage in that it is a rapid series of shots – usually much shorter in duration – meant to quickly inform the audience with some new information so they can get on with the story.

Chapter 8: Conflict, Obstacles and Rising Stakes

Conflict is what drives the story and keeps the energy high. Your story starts once a problem appears (Inciting Incident/Catalyst), and in order to keep it moving, you have to have conflict in every scene. We enjoy watching characters overcome obstacles with stakes that keep rising at every turn. The greater the conflict, the more energy is generated in your screenplay, and this is what gets the audience hooked.

The antagonist is the opposing force preventing (or trying to prevent) your Hero from getting what they want. Sometimes this is an external enemy, family member, co-worker, authority figure or downright villain, who challenges the main character and sets obstacles in their way.

Sometimes the antagonist is internal – your Hero is their own worst enemy. The internal conflict gets displayed outward in more and more complex and difficult ways – until your Hero has no choice but to "do or die" so to speak.

Developing conflict and "upping the stakes" is a skill that you can master. Ask yourself, "What if?" Followed by, "And then what happened?" Go beyond the most logical next steps your character might take or circumstances your character might encounter. Dig deep and challenge your Hero – don't let them off easy!

Push the Limits Writing Exercise

To help you develop your skills at creating conflict that is fresh and original, and pushes your Hero to the brink with no seeming solution in sight, list out at least 20 different obstacles that your Hero could encounter in your story.

You don't have to use all of these obstacles, but you'll notice that the first five or ten come easily – that's because you've seen these obstacles before. The car suddenly stalls on the tracks as a speeding train comes around the bend, or the Hero walks in on her true love making out with her best friend. But the farther down you get on the list, the more original and "outside the box" your ideas become. The Hero discovers that her true love is the one-night-stand she ghosted years ago and swore she'd never see again, who's back and seeking revenge (and doing a good job of it) by dating her dad.

Up the Stakes Writing Exercise

Another great exercise to sharpen your skills at writing conflict and rising stakes for your characters, is to start off with a "what if" statement such as these:

> Two teenagers steal the keys to a Ferrari from a restaurant valet and go for a joyride when...
>
> A man meets a woman through an on-line dating service and can't believe his good fortune. She's everything he's ever dreamed of until...

Of course, you can change these up and create your own open-ended scenarios. The point is to have fun, let the creativity flow and expand what's possible.

Chapter 9: Climax and Resolution

The climax and resolution both occur in the third act of the movie. The climax is the biggest challenge the Hero faces and answers the central question – always. If it doesn't, then the story isn't over – and the audience will leave scratching their heads. If the central question is, will the Hero find love? At the climax we find out – it's either yes or no – and sometimes the Hero surprises us (and themselves) and finds love in unexpected places.

The resolution wraps it all up. This is the last scene or two when the subplots come together, the Hero reflects on their journey, and the audience leaves knowing that all is well in the world – at least until the sequel, when the Hero must return to fight another day.

Knowing your climax and resolution, even before you've figured out all the details and complications in your second act, is like knowing your final destination on a long road trip. Work backwards to figure out the most complicated and exciting route to get your characters to where they need to be.

This is also a great way to develop your **Hero's arc** – their growth and evolution. Who do you want your character to be in the end? At the resolution, are they brave, in love, healed, happy or self-aware? Have they saved the world, found a lover or solved the mystery? Now make them the complete opposite in the beginning of your movie – scared, lonely, sad, or self-absorbed, faced with impossible problems. The bigger the leap, the more exciting it is to see the Hero triumph in the end.

The Climax is also preceded by a **"ticking clock"** from the second plot point onward – a sudden urgency when the Hero must reach their goal before all is lost. Regardless of the genre, this surge of energy puts us on the edge of our seats. We're dying to see what happens next and holding our breath every second the Hero rushes towards certain destruction. It's the high stakes that make the climax so exciting, endearing and heart wrenching – and why we got on this ride in the first place.

Chapter 10: Openings and Endings

The **opening** of your screenplay could make the difference between your screenplay ending up on the bottom of a growing pile of scripts awaiting their turn to be read by the producer (or more likely their assistant) or rising to the top and capturing the reader's attention within the first few pages; pages so powerful, that time seems to stop and the only thing that matters at that moment is finding out what happens next to your Hero. That's the kind of opening you want to create.

To begin, jump in with a bang! Start with an awesome image, an unsolved problem, a hilarious complication – something that gets us hooked and makes us want to know more. The opening image and scene sets the mood of the film, establishes the genre and conveys the theme.

What do you want to say with your movie? Start with an image that speaks to your implicit message and stirs emotions in your audience. For example, a story about a boy looking for his mother could begin with a magnifying glass, enlarging the inquisitive eye of a little boy searching for clues and answers. Or a speeding train could bolt us into a movie about a young man who can't leave his small town and troubled past fast enough.

The **ending** of your movie is just as important as your opening. Your audience trusts you to take them to their desired conclusion. Whether that's solving the mystery, bringing the lovers together, or resolving the impending threat so that all may live another day. Audiences want the story to come full circle, and feel the deep satisfaction of having been entertained.

Like the opening image, the ending is where you get to remind the audience of your implicit message and themes. What do you want the audience to come away with? How do you want the audience to feel? For example, for a chilling horror movie, by the end you may want your audience to feel that all is well in the world, that good overcomes evil and that they are safe...for now. This is where you can slide in the "open" ending where the audience soon realizes that there is still more evil to be overcome – and of course, that's a perfect set up for your sequel.

Keep in mind that most moviegoers watch movies for entertainment. It's been this way for over 100 years since silent movies started delighting audiences with the first-ever moving images on a screen. Your ending should wrap it up and leave us feeling satisfied. We want happy endings – or at least an ending where we know that all was not in vain. Sure, you can write an unhappy movie with an unhappy ending, where the Hero does not get what they want – this is "real life, right? You may get some viewers for your film that don't already have enough "real life" in their lives and want to experience more – but most moviegoers want to escape their hardships for a while, and take solace in a movie where everything works out in the end.

Chapter 11: Creating Characters

In order for a movie to sell, it has to be castable. This means, screenwriters must write memorable and interesting characters that actors want to portray. And not just the Hero and Villain – all characters in a screenplay should be "round" characters – lifelike and complex who evolve over the course of the story. You want to avoid "flat" characters with few distinctive traits who don't really change over the course of the story. This may seem obvious, but how do you create a character that audiences will remember, quote, and want to dress up as for their next costume party?

First off, spend time with your character, get to know them, and eventually fall in love with them. Even the "bad guys" in your screenplay will become like dear children to you. Your characters will look to you for their motivations, thoughts, feelings and actions. In order for your characters to really come to life, they need to have real life qualities.

One way to do this is to list out your character's traits. Discover their wants, needs, joys and fears. Create their backstory – what happened to them in the past? How has this shaped who they are today? Find images of what your character looks like, where they live, work, their family, friends, favorite hobbies, phobias and obsessions.

The fun challenge is to avoid the **stereotype** trap, defined in the dictionary as, "a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing." You want your characters to be believable, relatable and unique.

You also want your characters to have a **character arc** – to grow and evolve (or devolve) throughout the course of your story. One way to do this is to imagine who you want them to be by the end of the screenplay, and then make them the opposite at the start. All of the challenges that you throw in your character's way will help them become their best (or worst) selves in the end.

Try these fun exercises to help you get started.

Roll the Dice Character Game

One way to develop characters from scratch is to roll some dice.

Start by rolling two dice and see where they land. This becomes your character's age. For example, if you roll a 6 and a 2, your character can either be 62 or 26 – your choice.

Next, flip a coin to decide the sex of your character – if they identify as one. As the creator, this is completely up to you.

The next step is to then go online and search baby popular names by decade. For example, if a character is 26, they would have been born 26 years ago – so that would be 1995 at the time of writing this book. Popular boys' names in that year were Michael, Matthew, Christopher and Jacob. Pick your favorite.

Finally, search images of "cars" or "pets" or "vacation destinations" and pick a few that you think fit your character.

Now that you've got a basic understanding of who your character is, describe them. Why do they drive that vehicle? Where do they live? How did they get their pet and what's its name?

Now take that character and integrate them into your story. Where do they fit? How do they relate to the other characters? Let your imagination play and have fun getting to know them.

Another exercise is to create Character Bios and Visualization Boards. This is a great way to start seeing your movie and character come to life.

Chapter 12: Dialogue

When it comes to writing dialogue, the adage “It’s better to show than to tell” is key when crafting your screenplay. As a visual artform, we’d rather see a character survive a hurricane or reunite with their long lost lover, than to hear them talk about it. But when a character does speak in a movie, it’s an opportunity to craft meaningful and memorable dialogue, to make that character unforgettable.

So how do you begin? Writing good, snappy dialogue that’s unique to each character can be daunting at first, and oftentimes all the characters in the script end up sounding like you, the writer. But don’t be deterred. Below are some tips to get you hearing your characters’ voices in your head, so you can craft it onto the page and make an impact.

Dialogue Tips

Listen

When characters speak in movies, they don’t sound like the rest of us in our everyday conversations – they’re much “smarter” if you will, able to convey meaning and importance in just the right amount of words with the greatest impact.

One way to train yourself to write good dialogue is to listen to it – without watching the action on the screen. Start by playing a movie or television show in the background and really listen to how the characters speak, what they say, and what they don’t say. Listen for the silent moments too. This will train your ear to discern between “good dialogue” or just “so-so dialogue” that expresses the character, pushes the plot, and sometimes makes us cry or laugh.

Don’t start writing it too soon

Although you may already be hearing dialogue as soon as you start piecing together the plot, restrain yourself from getting lost in the conversations. If you write dialogue too soon, there’s a tendency for the characters to over-explain, and describe to other characters what’s happening, instead of showing what’s happening through action. Also, you might get too attached to your dialogue, and be unwilling to let it go, even when the script requires it.

It’s recommended to start writing dialogue after you’ve nailed down the plot, gotten to know your characters, developed the conflict within each scene, and written out your action in your treatment. Now that you have a clear map to follow, the dialogue becomes like the great attractions along the way – unique, impactful, and memorable.

Is it needed?

Dialogue should push the story and be true to the characters and situation to make it work. If in doubt, cut the

dialogue out and see if the scene can stand on its own. Sometimes what is not said is even more powerful than words. A look or an action can speak volumes.

For example, a character calmly packing up her things and leaving a heated argument without saying a word, can have just as much, if not more of a determined impact, than if she explains to her lover that she's leaving.

Keep it short

One good rule of thumb is to keep each piece of dialogue to about three sentences or "beats." This creates a good rhythm in your scene, as characters banter back and forth, or as you interrupt the dialogue with action to remind the reader of what's happening in the scene.

Make each voice unique

Each character in your story is unique, and their dialogue should sound unique to them as well. Play around with the vocabulary, pronunciation, dialect, slang or short-hand between characters. Does what they say, or how they say it, reflect their personality? Do they sound like they've started their day with too much caffeine? Or do they choose their words carefully – more of a thinker, than a speaker? Do they speak first and think later?

Don't tell us what we already know

Avoid having characters explain to other characters what the audience already knows. Instead, jump right into the scene mid-conversation, after the "news" has already been delivered. This will keep the energy high and your audience engaged.

Avoid hitting it "on the nose"

This is where the art of subtext comes in. Instead of having characters state what's on their mind, let them talk around it, imply what they mean or simply avoid the topic altogether – even though it's clear that the "topic" is clearly all they can think about. This makes for interesting moments with underlying tension around what's not being said. It's a great way to have your characters "dance" around each other and makes for great entertainment.

For example, instead of a character saying, "I want to break up," they might talk around it by saying, "Have you ever tried to fix a broken mirror, and all you got out of it was a trip to the emergency room and a finger full of stitches? Sometimes it's better to leave well enough alone and move on – don't you agree?"

Speak it outloud

After writing out your dialogue in a scene, read it outloud – or better yet, get someone else to read it outloud

to you. Hearing your characters speak the words you've written, will help you refine your skills at writing good dialogue.

DIALOGUE WRITING EXERCISE

In proper screenplay format, type a scene of dialogue between your main character/protagonist and your antagonist or a secondary character.

Create a fictional setting that does *not* take place in your script.

Put these two characters in this setting and have them carry on a conversation for at least one page, no more than two pages.

Use subtext – each character is trying to say something to the other character without actually coming out and saying it.

Choose from one of the following:

I love you

I don't trust you

Accept me as I am

I'm excited

We're in danger

Chapter 13: Writing your first draft

Screenwriting is rewriting, and rewriting and rewriting...it's an ongoing creative process that starts with you, the screenwriter, and eventually morphs into a creative collaboration between you, the producer, the director and an entire crew of talented people. Which is why screenwriting is so appealing.

You've conceived of your story idea, plotted it out, flushed out your characters and listened to them speak, and now you're ready to write. Technically, you've been writing your screenplay this entire time, from the first conception of your idea to the moment you type FADE IN.

Because you've mapped out your story in your treatment, you now have the freedom to create. You can write your screenplay sequentially...or not. Meaning, you can jump around with your writing and develop the scenes that really inspire you first. This is a great way to keep your momentum going and to help you avoid the dreaded "writer's block," where you take more trips to the fridge than fresh paragraphs on the page.

Tips for building your scenes

Structure

It's important to start your scene in a high-energy place, raise the stakes higher and higher and then cut before the energy starts to taper off or even burn out. This is the kind of momentum you want with each scene to keep the energy high from FADE IN to FADE OUT, regardless of the genre.

For example, you could start your scene as the alarm clock goes off and your character gets out of bed, checks his cell phone, brushes his teeth, gets dressed for work and then grabs his keys to leave the house when he hears about a zombie outbreak on the TV news, then he puts his shoes on, grabs his coat and leaves – with a scene like this, you have to build the energy from nothing, and the next scene will have to pick up the momentum.

Or, you could start your scene with screaming voices coming from the apartment next door, as your character, unfazed, hauls himself out of bed and brushes his teeth. When the blood curdling screams persist, and he opens his window to put an end to it, a zombie smashes through the screen and grabs his electric toothbrush. He slams the window, spewing zombie goo everywhere, snatches back his toothbrush and declares, "I wasn't done with that."

The second example starts with tension, keeps the stakes high and ends with a humours button that leaves the audience wondering, "What will this character do next?"

Setups and payoffs

As mentioned in chapter 7, a good setup and payoff is a device that introduces a subtle character trait, line of dialogue, object, clue, or story point that later returns with an "ah-ha" moment or reveal for the audience that has a significance to the storyline. It's a great tool to add mystery, suspense, humor, and intrigue to your screenplay.

Exposition

Exposition is background information that the audience needs to know to make your story make sense. The challenge, of course, is to inform your audience without boring your audience. The solution is to disguise the information with action, tension, or humor.

For example, continuing with the zombie story idea – let's say your character is driving through town on his way to work, explaining to his boss over his car phone why he's late. All the while, he's pegging zombies with his Prius, racking points like a high-speed video game.

From the phone call, the audience gets all of the information needed to get oriented to this world – while being entertained at the same time, watching zombie parts spew across the road and windshield.

Avoid the character's thoughts

As you're describing the action in your scenes, avoid words such as: he wonders, she thinks, they consider, etc. The audience won't be reading your script while watching your movie, so it's your job to convey your character's thoughts and feelings through action or through dialogue within the scene.

Don't rely on the actors to figure out what you mean. Get creative and come up with unique ways to show what your character "thinks" about his lover. Have your character smell a rose that was set up earlier in the script to be his lover's favorite flower. Your character could look at a photo of his lover on his phone, listen to a favorite song, pass by the park bench where they first met and run his fingers across their carved initials. Movies are visual, so keep that in mind whenever you find yourself inside your character's head.

Make it visual

Descriptions and actions read differently in a screenplay than in a novel, where the writer has the luxury of time. Screenplay descriptions and action are snappier, to the point, and in just a few words or sentences, a screenwriter can paint an entire picture. This skill can be developed over time, and one way to hone it, is to read lots of well-written screenplays. Learn from the masters, and soon you'll be thinking and writing visually as well.

Another great method for visual writing, is to use metaphors and similes. Instead of describing your character as "Jasmine, a young woman, dressed in bell bottoms and platform shoes," describe her as, "Jasmine dresses like a disco queen, where flashy just isn't flashy enough."

Button a scene

"Buttoning a scene" is like the cliff hanger before a commercial break. After your quick trip to the fridge, you'll be sure to be back for more. This button is the funny line, action, question, at the end of the scene that creates a burst of energy that keeps us hooked.

As you're wrapping up your scene, ask yourself, "Who's the most important person in this scene?" Give that character the last line of dialogue or the last bit of action, so they stand out and make the greatest impact.

Chapter 14: Formatting

In order to make a positive, first impression with your screenplay and showcase your skills as a writer, you'll need to use proper formatting. There are many resources online to help answer your formatting questions, and here are some essential formatting techniques to get you started on the right track.

Keep in mind that you're writing for the producer, the actors, the director and the crew. Your script will need to be engaging, entertaining and well written in order to get financing behind it to get it produced. Once it's in production, it becomes the roadmap for the crew to put your vision on the big screen.

There are primarily three parts to your screenplay: the scene headings, the description/action and dialogue.

Screenwriting Software

Using screenwriting software will save you time and help you format your script properly. There are many different kinds of software and online programs out there. Do your research online and choose one that fits your needs and budget.

Script length

Typically feature length screenplays are between 90 – 120 pages long.

With a short script, you can pick your length, although if you want to produce it and enter the film into festivals, do some research to determine the best length for your needs. For example, a 10 minute short film may have a better chance of getting selected for a festival piece and becoming part of a "short series" at a festival, than a 40 minute film.

Editing and Camera Directions

It's better to use narrative description to show what's happening in the scene than to use editing or camera direction. For example, avoid using MATCH CUT or LOW ANGLE, etc. The story is the key, and it's not your job as the writer to determine the exact camera angles or edits in the movie – that will be left to the Director, Cinematographer and Editor.

Avoid "We see" or "We hear"

Including "we see" or "we hear" in the narrative description takes the reader out of the script. Instead, just describe what is seen or heard in the scene. For example, "We see him cautiously approach the abandoned car" is better written as, "He cautiously approaches the abandoned car."

Scene Descriptions Length

Scene description paragraphs should be 4 or 5 lines only. Add a space, and then continue with the next paragraph or cut to dialogue. This will make your script easier to read, and help format your screenplay so that 1 page of script equals about 1 minute of film.

FADE IN

Begin your screenplay with FADE IN (all caps), justified to the left. These are the first words of your screenplay.

Scene Headings (Slug Lines)

Camera Location: INT. for Interior or EXT. for exterior

Scene location: the location where the scene is taking place

Time of day: DAY or NIGHT

Example of a Master Scene Heading:

INT. CASINO – NIGHT

Secondary Scene Headings can be used if a single location has many smaller locations within it. This can make the scene sequence easier to read and can be helpful for action sequences as well.

INT. CASINO – NIGHT

Add some description/action here.

AT THE BAR

Add some description/action here.

SLOTS ROOM

Add some description/action here.

Follow every scene heading with a line or more of description/action before writing the dialogue.

MONTAGE and SERIES OF SHOTS

A montage is a series of short sequences/actions or images that express a single concept or theme, such as falling in love, the passage of time, a building or project coming together from start to end, etc.

This is a great tool to manipulate time. Montages will occur without dialogue and usually play out in the film over music. Refer to chapter 7 for more information.

BEGIN MONTAGE – JASMINE AND ALISHA FALL IN LOVE

— INT. CAFE – DAY — They meet when Jasmine bumps into Alisha, spilling her latte all over her white blouse.

— EXT. DRY CLEANERS – DAY — Alisha wears Jasmine's coat, while Jasmine hands the white blouse over to the attendant.

— INT. MOVIE THEATER – DAY — They share popcorn in the dark theater. Alisha still wears Jasmine's coat.

— EXT. DRY CLEANERS – DAY — Alisha now wears her white blouse and hands Jasmine her coat. Jasmine grabs Alisha's hand and doesn't let go. Alisha's smile says it all.

END MONTAGE

A series of shots usually focuses on one subject/concept and consists of rapid shots that tell a chronological story.

SERIES OF SHOTS – TYRONE PICKS THE LOCK

A) Tyrone unzips his case of lock picks.

B) Tyrone grabs a pick and steadies himself.

C) The timer counts down – only 10 seconds left.

D) With precision, Tyrone turns the pick and the lock unclicks.

END SERIES OF SHOTS

FLASHBACKS and DREAM SEQUENCES

A flashback is another tool that writers can use to manipulate time. Format dream sequences, nightmares, daydreams, visions, flashforwards in the same way that the flashback is formatted. Refer to chapter 7 for more information.

BEGIN FLASHBACK

INT. HIGH SCHOOL HALLWAY – DAY

Add some narrative description/action here.

INT. CAFETERIA – DAY

Add some narrative description/action here.

END FLASHBACK

Character First Appearances

Capitalize a character's name the first time they make an appearance in the screenplay. Follow with a great description that gives your reader a visual introduction to your memorable character. This helps to avoid confusion, and helps the Assistant Director and Casting Director create a cast list.

The door slams open, and in walks DESIREE (25), hotter than the Texas sun and ready for a fight. Her slim figure is deceiving. She's five feet of determination that will knock your boots off.

Sounds

Capitalize unusual or important sounds in your script so they stand out for the reader and for the sound design team.

A heavy, animalistic PANTING wakes Marcus from his deep sleep. As his vision slowly clears, he stares straight into a hungry tiger's mouth.

SUPERS

Use SUPER, which is short for superimpose when you need to superimpose text on the screen.

SUPER: "1975 Dallas, Texas"

Parentheticals

Directly below the character's name, in parenthesis, you can include personal direction for the actor. Use this sparingly. It's meant for specific instruction when the actor may not get your intention for the delivery of their character's dialogue.

KAI

(sarcastically)

Is that for me?

Off Screen (O.S.) and Voice Overs (V.O.)

A voice that occurs on screen, but the character is not seen in the scene is (O.S.)

A voice that comes through a phone is a (PHONE V.O.)

A voice that is heard in the character's mind is a (V.O.)

Telephone Conversations

If a character talks on the phone, and the person on the other end is *not* heard or seen, format it as any other dialogue.

FERNANDO

He said what?!

(wiping away sweat)

Tell him I'll be there in ten with the cash.

If a character talks on the phone and the person on the other end *is* heard but not seen:

FERNANDO

He said what?!

RICHARD (PHONE V.O.)

Hope he likes deep sea diving.

Fernando wipes sweat from his brow.

FERNANDO

Tell him I'll be there in ten with the cash.

If a character talks on the phone and the person on the other end is heard and also seen:

INT. TRUCK STOP, PAY PHONE BOOTH – NIGHT

Fernando flips a quarter. Heads. He slams it into the phone and dials.

EXT. DESERTED CITY STREET – NIGHT

Richard paces and takes a drag on his cigarette. The cellphone held tight to his ear.

INTERCUT – TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

FERNANDO

He said what?!

RICHARD

Hope he likes deep sea diving.

Fernando wipes sweat from his brow.

FERNANDO

Tell him I'll be there in ten with the cash.

Emails and Text Messages

Only format spoken words as dialogue. With text messages or emails, format it like this:

Marjory's phone DINGS. She reads the text.

"Where you been? Miss U"

Or you could format like this:

Arthur stares at his phone. It reads: "It's complicated"

Foreign Languages or Deaf Dialogue

Always write your script in the language of the reader. This way there's no confusion, they know exactly what's happening in your script.

ELSA

(in German)

You never should have come.

For deaf dialogue, do something similar.

BRIT

(while signing)

Don't do that again!

Character Sounds

Avoid writing screams, grunts, or cries as dialogue – write these in the action/description instead. Only include spoken words as dialogue.

Incorrect:

EDGAR

AHHHHHHH!!!!!

Correct:

Edgar screams.

FADE OUT

End your screenplay with FADE OUT (all caps), justified to the right. These are the final words of your screenplay.

FADE OUT

Chapter 15: Rewriting

As mentioned in the earlier chapter, screenwriting is rewriting – and this process can be both fun and daunting. The thing to remember is that your work is never really done – your goal is to get it "done enough" so that you can move from the writing phase into the producing phase, where you start to shop your script around, enter screenwriting contests or put it into production.

It's important to keep in mind that screenwriting is a collaborative art. The writer gives birth to the script, but many key players will have a hand in bringing this "baby" to life on the big screen.

Tips for making the most of your rewrite

Proof it

The importance of proper grammar, punctuation, spelling and formatting in your screenplay can not be stressed enough. Every script is your calling card and your opportunity to show your industry colleagues that you're a pro.

No matter how engaging your script is, if you have typos throughout, the reader, consciously or unconsciously, could consider your script subpar – and there's no need for that.

Ask a friend or family member to read your work to correct any writing errors before you share it.

Hire a script analyst to give you professional feedback, not only on your story structure and character development, but on your writing as well.

Set your script aside for a few days and go back to it with fresh eyes. You'll often catch some of those "hidden" errors this way.

Read your script through several times, each time focusing on a different aspect of the script:

Typos

Formatting errors

Action and description

Verb usage

Dialogue

Plot points/timing

Learn how to give and receive feedback

This is an important step in the process and will help you keep your sanity and your self esteem as your work of art, that you've poured your heart and soul into, is judged, questioned and sometimes rewritten.

Here's a helpful guide on feedback etiquette.

Be polite – listen quietly and attentively when screenplays are read. You have the right to "pass" on reading a part, but be prepared to participate with feedback.

How to give feedback

Start with what you liked. What worked for you? How did the characters and the dialogue make you feel? Was the description/action clear and compelling?

If something didn't work for you or was confusing, or you notice formatting errors, tell the writer, but be considerate. Thoughtful, constructive feedback goes a long way. And remember – soon it will be your turn to have your script read!

How to receive feedback

Listen with an open mind.

Don't defend or over-explain your story. If you have to, then it's not clear to begin with.

Take notes and perhaps make changes in future drafts.

Genuinely consider all opinions – perhaps you'll get a new perspective on your story or find that something you thought was clear isn't coming through to the reader. Then, accept what rings true to you and leave the rest.

Chapter 16: What's next?

You've finished your first draft and your second, your third...your twenty third...and now you're ready to get your script onto the big screen.

Tips and resources to get your script made

Getting your script made isn't an easy task, but it is possible. Determination, right attitude and a sense of humor will take you far in this industry and in life.

So start by educating yourself on the options out there for aspiring screenwriters. Remember, every writer has to start somewhere, and if you enjoy this process, then by all means do it.

Keep in mind that if a website, producer, workshop, etc. promises you something that sounds too good to be true (and it comes with a hefty price tag or giving up your rights to your screenplay without compensation in return for promises of great wealth and fame) then it probably is too good to be true. Street smarts go a long way in this business, and coming to the playing field with some skills and knowledge will give you the confidence and resilience to stay in the game – and have fun along the way.

Table Read

Once you've finalized your draft, proofed it, and shared it with a script analyst and/or other writers, whose feedback and expertise you trust, it's time to do a table read.

Gather a group of actors, sit around a table or room, where everyone has a copy of the script and can see and hear each other, assign roles, pick a narrator, and then sit back and listen. Don't join in and read a character or narration – this is your opportunity as a writer to really listen and get a sense of your script's pacing and dialogue. You'll find the areas that work and those that don't – and you'll get valuable feedback that you can integrate into another polish of your script.

Organizations for screenwriters

The WGA Writers Guild of America is the Union for professional screenwriters, for both film and television. In order to join the union, you must be employed by or sell a screenplay to a "signatory" company (a company that has signed the Guild's collective bargaining agreement).

Most screenwriters who are just starting out are not eligible to be a member, but the information provided on the WGA website is valuable. The "schedule of minimums" for example, will give you an idea of what the industry-standard pay rate is for a feature screenplay.

The WGA Foundation is a non-profit organization that is dedicated to the preservation and promotion of the history and craft of screenwriting. They offer a Volunteer and Mentorship program, The Veterans Writing Project, Visiting Writers Program, Writers' Access Support Staff Training Program, and excellent workshops and events

that are open to the public. This organization is a fantastic way to network with other aspiring and professional writers and learn from industry professionals to help you hone your craft.

Copyright

Once you start shopping your script around, entering it into contests, or you put it into production, it's a good idea to get your work copyrighted. Go to the copyright.gov website and register your screenplay under the "Performing Arts" category.

Contests, Festivals and Fellowships

Contests, film festivals and screenwriting fellowships can be a great way to get recognition for your work and help you get your foot in the door in this industry. Submission usually comes with a fee, however, so do your research and make sure that each contest, festival or fellowship is worth your time and money.

Consider who is behind the organization or event, how long they've been around, any reviews from past participants, the submission cost, and the award for the winners and finalists. Oftentimes it can be an introduction to film or television production companies, which you can research in advance, online.

College courses

Although a college degree is not required in this industry to write and sell a script, taking college courses, learning from the experts and having a structured course outline with deadlines to meet, can be of great benefit if you are just starting out. It's also a great way to network and meet other creative writers and filmmakers that you could potentially partner with to get your script made.

Hone your craft

Finally, if you love screenwriting, then write! With each script you'll sharpen your skills and develop your own unique voice and writing style that will make you stand out from the rest.

Practice setting deadlines for yourself and meeting those deadlines. Create a writing space that is all your own, away from distractions.

Don't set a timeline for yourself to "make it" in this industry. If working in the industry is what you want to do, then set your mind to it and don't worry about when your "big break" will happen – just continue to learn, network and enjoy the entire process along the way.

For Instructors

I've included an example of my course syllabus and schedule breakdown for a full 16-week semester. This

particular course was taught online in a synchronous format, where the class met over Zoom two mornings a week. Collaboration and group activities were done through breakout rooms.

Chapter 17: Sample Course Syllabus and Schedule

CINE/DBA 115

Creative Writing for TV/Cinema

Full Semester 16-WEEK Class

Course Syllabus, fall 2021

Professor Candace Rose

Pronouns: (she, her, hers)

Cine/DBA 115 – section numbers 70104, 70343

Classroom: **Online Synchronous Course**

Days/Times: **Mon/Wed 9:35 – 11am in Canvas Zoom**

Zoom in Canvas direct link (Link in Canvas too)

"W
My
tec
Cir
Cre
Wr
TV
Cir
is t
int
you
cro
scr
an
the
ne
you
ins
an
you
sho
scr
Be
be
Pro
Cir
als
filr
firs
ge
col
stu
col
col
gro
pro
da
a V
Ve
mo
ver
No
son
fec
wo
the
be

Sp
mo
– P
an
Dir

De
mo
– P
an
Wr

Professor

Candace Rose

Appendix

This is where you can add appendices or other back matter.