

A BEGINNERS GUIDE TO SCREENWRITING

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Introduction

Hello screenwriters! Before we begin this journey, I wanted to thank you for taking some time out of your day to read this eBook! As a writer myself, I understand the struggles writers face and believe me, it's not as easy as you think. However, it can be achievable, you must put in the time and effort each day you write! Fear not, you aren't alone and I'm here to guide you!

When I first took screenwriting back in 2013, I thought the process was grueling and challenging. Sure, I'll admit that I had an idea of what a screenplay was, but I had no idea how much the pre-production process was prior to writing. So, I decided to make it simple and write a ten-page short film. By the end of the courses end, I came to realize that it wasn't as painful as I thought it would be.

From there, I continued to further my screenwriting knowledge by taking a few more courses and even went on to write my first feature, which took about nine months to complete the first draft. Side note, I'm still making edits to the script and getting it out into the industry.

During this eBook, I'm going to give you the best tips and advice that I was taught during my screenwriting courses, but also provide some insightful knowledge based on my own experiences.

So, what are we waiting for? Let the journey begin!

Chapter 1: Loglines

Before you begin writing the first draft, you need to have an idea of what your film is going to be about. The main thing you have to ask yourself is, "What is the story about?" Even before you can write a logline, it's important to understand the following formula. "When {INCITING INCIDENT) happens. [OUR PROTAGONIST] decides [TO DO ACTION] against [ANTAGONIST]."

Loglines are basically a one to two sentence logline, usually thirty-five words or less, that summarizes what the film is about. If you've looked around on IMDB, there's a few loglines for films that you can refer to.

When writing a logline, make sure the following questions are answered:

1. Who's story is it? (A (adjective) _____)
2. What does he/she need or want? (goal)
3. What must he/she overcome to get that? (Make sure it's tangible and concrete. No theme, concept, or ideas.)
4. Why do we care? (What's at risk if they fail?)

Example: When a teenage Kansas girl is tornadoed away into Oz, she, a scarecrow, tin man, and lion, helps her to meet the wizard while battling a wicked witch and flying monkeys, in order to get home.

Based on the example above, let's break down each of the questions.

Who's story is it? Teenage Kansas girl

What does he/she want? Meet the wizard

What must he/she overcome to get that? Wicked witch and flying monkeys.

Why do we care? If she doesn't meet the wizard, she can't go home.

Here's another example from Finding Nemo: When his son is swept out to sea, an anxious clownfish embarks on a perilous journey across a treacherous ocean to bring him back.

"But why would I need to write a logline first?" you ask yourself. Loglines are not only important for you to know what your script is going to be about, but also for producers in the industry to know as well. If you turn in a script without a logline, producers are going to have a hard time understanding the script. If you attach a logline to your script, then whoever is reading it will have an idea of what to expect as they read through the pages.

Writing activity: Think of a movie you like and come up with a logline using the formula above.

Now that you have wrote the logline, you can start by working on one for your project. One thing I like to do is write a few different loglines and pick the one that interests me the most. From there, I'll write a few different variations of the logline until I feel it looks good. Remember, you can always go back and adjust your logline as much as you want, even if you're still working on the first draft.

Chapter 2: Beat Sheets: The Blueprint of Your Script

So now that you're feeling good about your logline, next is the beat sheet. Although it's not a requirement, it's always nice to have the beats of the story laid out. And the best part is, this is for your eyes only, so no one else gets to see it.

Think about it like this, would you build a house without blueprints in front of you? I certainly hope not.

Most screenwriters are familiar with Blake Snyder's "Save the Cat" and, my screenwriting instructor kind of had a similar method, but with additional beats that were filler scenes. Look at the example below.

1. **Opening Image:** First thing we see on screen (Pg. 1)
2. **Ordinary World:** Sets the tone of the world. Introduces protagonist. 3 positive traits and 3 negative traits. Likes/dislikes. Fatal flaw. Emotional void. (Pgs. 1-10)
3. **Opening Hook:** Theme of the film. Also known as "the lesson" the character learns. It's the message you want the audience to learn. (Example: Life is full of second chances.) (Pg. 5)
4. **Inciting Incident:** Story begins. Big/Bad news destroys protagonist's life. (Pg. 10)
5. **Big Debate Part 1:** Shows fallout from Inciting Incident (Pgs. 10-17)
6. **Mini Crisis:** Tangable goal is recognized. How the protagonist is going to fix the problem (Pg. 17)
7. **Big Debate Part 2:** Scenes that lead up to PONR (Pgs. 17-26)
8. **Point of No Return:** First step in taking the journey. (Pg. 26)

9. **TRAILER/TEASER/POPCORN MOMENTS:** Protagonist gets limited to new world. Elements of conflict based in fish out of water. Advances the story. Develops the characters. (Pgs. 26-45)
10. **B Story:** Character/emotional/alternate story. (The “love” story.) Mentor helps guide our protagonist along the journey. Things go badly because of characters fatal flaws. (Pg. 30)
11. **Testing:** A story is tested in major way and fails due to fatal flaw. Mirrors climax with higher stakes. (Pg. 45)
12. **Sequence to One Hour Turning Point** (Pgs. 50-60)
13. **One Hour Turning Point:** Big change in character. Antagonist raises the stakes. (Pg. 60)
14. **Bad Guys Close In:** Stakes raised. Protagonist still flawed. (Pgs. 60-75)
15. **Hero Melts:** Big pit and Rock Bottom (Pgs. 75-90)
16. **Big Pit:** “Almost” moment. Either A story or B story fails. (Pg. 75)
17. **Rock Bottom:** All is lost. Protagonist loses everything and has an epiphany. (The “ah ha” moment.) (Pg. 90)
18. **Climax:** Facing fear, making sacrifice choice, and forcing enemy action head on doing the right thing the right way. (Pgs. 90-95)
19. **New World Order:** Mirrors ordinary world. See new stakes and new life. (Pgs. 95-100)
20. **Closing Image:** Last thing we see. (Pg. 100)

Most films today have character development, which is incredibly important to any film. The main way to develop your protagonist is have them go through these beats and surely by the end, they’ll be transformed by the end. If you have an ensemble cast, it’s important at least one of the characters hits all of the beats. For example in “The

Hangover” Alan hits all of the beats, although the story is centered around a group of friends in Vegas during a bachelor party.

However, if you’re writing a short film or TV Pilot, then you don’t need all of the beats. For a ten page short film, there’s not going to be enough time for a B Story. When I think of making a beat sheet for a short film, I keep the following in mind.

Opening Image (page 1)

Ordinary World (page 1)

Opening Hook (page 1)

Inciting Incident (page 1)

Mini Crisis (page 2)

Point of no Return (page 2)

Midpoint (page 5)

Big Pit (page 8)

Rock Bottom (page 8)

Climax/New World Order (page 9)

Closing Image (page 10)

Writing activity: Watch a film and see if you can make your own beat sheet. Feel free to pause and take notes on when each beat occurs in the film. Sometimes the inciting incident doesn’t happen 10 pages in exactly, but if the beats are there, it works.

Chapter 3: What Makes a Film Great

If you were to ask someone, “What makes a film great?” there’s going to be a bunch of answers because after all, film is subjective, and everyone has different likes and dislikes. A normal theatergoer can walk into a movie and decide if they like it or not. A filmmaker, on the other hand, can watch a film and dive deeper into why they liked or didn’t like a film. Below, I’ve devised a few elements of what I believe makes a film great!

Strong Character Development

Character development is a crucial element in creating a successful film. It refers to the process of creating and portraying realistic, multi-dimensional characters that audiences can relate to and care about. In a well-written film, character development serves as the foundation for the plot and theme, providing an emotional anchor that drives the narrative forward.

There are several reasons why character development is important to a film. Firstly, it helps to engage the audience on an emotional level. When audiences care about the characters in a film, they become invested in their story and want to know what happens to them. This emotional investment is what keeps audiences engaged throughout the film, making them more likely to recommend the film to others and to watch it again in the future.

Secondly, character development can help to drive the plot. Characters who have clear motivations, desires, and flaws can create conflict and tension within a story, pushing the narrative forward and keeping audiences engaged. For example, in the film "The Godfather," the character of Michael Corleone undergoes a significant transformation from a reluctant outsider to a ruthless leader. This transformation is

driven by his desire to protect his family, and it creates tension and conflict within the story that ultimately drives the plot forward.

Thirdly, character development can help to convey the film's themes and messages. By creating characters who embody different values, beliefs, and worldviews, filmmakers can explore complex issues and ideas in a way that resonates with audiences. For example, in the film "Black Panther," the character of T'Challa embodies the idea of a just and responsible leader, while the character of Killmonger represents the anger and frustration of those who have been oppressed. By contrasting these two characters, the film explores complex issues of power, race, and justice in a way that is both engaging and thought-provoking.

Finally, character development can help to create a lasting impact on the audience. When audiences connect with a character on an emotional level, they are more likely to remember them long after the film has ended. This can lead to a lasting impact on the way audiences think and feel about certain issues and ideas, helping to shape their worldview and beliefs.

Conflict

It's important that every scene contains conflict. Without conflict, there is no purpose and audiences are likely to lose interest quickly. The best way to have conflict is having an obstacle or antagonistic force that prevents the character from reaching their goal for the scene.

Having an original story

If you haven't noticed, there's a lot of remakes, sequels, and prequels made in the industry these days, but that doesn't mean there aren't any original movies made anymore.

When you're working on your script, it's important your film is original and you're providing your own voice. If someone watches a movie and they compare it to a similar film, then the overall idea isn't original. However, if your concept is somewhat familiar to something that has been made, then you can easily throw in a few twists on common tropes to make the film more original.

For example, let's say you're working on a time travel movie. Sure, it's been done a bunch of times, and in fact they're still being made today. One thing to consider is how is this different compared to every time travel movie ever made? In situations like this, it's always best to go back and compare different movies that involve time travel and see how you can put a few twists on the common tropes.

Having an overall message you want the audience to walk away with

We very briefly went over the theme, or opening hook, but what truly makes a film great is having an impactful message audiences can walk away with. The overall message isn't more about what the protagonist must learn, but what the writer wants the audience to take in once the credits roll. For example, "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and take a look around every once in a while, you could miss it" is the main lesson of Ferris Buller's Day Off, and it's the lesson Cameron has to learn throughout the film. Not only can audiences relate to the theme, but they're also able to leave the film and reflect on appreciating what is going on around them.

Conclusion

So now that you've completed your first draft, it's time for the endless rewriting process. Take some time to go through the pages and make any necessary changes. How does the pacing look? Does each scene contain conflict? Are there any spelling or grammar errors? Before you move on to the next project, you'll have to spend some time making sure this is as good as it can be. Remember, writing is a journey, so enjoy it! After all, no one wants to read a sloppy first draft, and as a reader myself, it's simple to identify.

When the final edits are made, it's time to get some feedback, whether it's from your peers, family, friends, or a script consultant. If you're unsure who to get feedback from, there are a few different ways such as Coverfly or screenwriting Facebook groups. Note: when you do receive feedback from someone, professional or not, just keep in mind you are in control of the script and you can use whatever information resonates with you and make the necessary adjustments from there.

Believe it or not, everyone goes through struggles with their scripts, including the famous ones, so you're not alone! If you decide to get feedback from a professional, you'll know that your script is in good hands with someone who has hands on experience and knows the ins and outs of screenwriting. When I first put my script out into the industry for feedback, I'm willing to admit that I've received mixed reviews and I could tell who really analyzed the script and someone who simply skimmed it and asked a bunch of questions, which if they paid more attention to, would have already been answered in the script.

I'll even admit it can be scary having your script being read in a screenwriting group, so if someone doesn't like your script, it doesn't mean you're a bad writer. Think about it like this, there's at least one person out there who will like your project, so keep going!

If you've found this eBook informative, please let me know! I understand not everything could be covered, but I just wanted to give you a boost towards the beginning of your journey. I could go on and on about other screenwriting topics, yet there's so much information I can pack into this eBook!

Depending on how you look at it, writing can be fun and enjoyable or painful, like getting your teeth pulled. It's all up to how you approach it. Just keep in mind, the more time and effort you put into your script, the more it'll pay off in the end.

Thanks to the knowledge I took away from my screenwriting courses, I've been able to have three features, all of which are still being edited, and sharing my experiences with clients.

If you have any questions or comments, please let me know! I would love to help you out! Also, don't forget to check out my website: www.davidschwartzconsulting.com for some services I provide along with some other screenwriting blogs that not only offer tips, but will also help guide you throughout your writing journey!