Screenwriting

Main article: Filmmaking
See also: Screenwriter

Screenwriting, also called **script-writing**, is the art and

Example of a page from a screenplay formatted for feature length film. This is an excerpt from the original script of Natural Born Killers by Quentin Tarantino.

craft of writing scripts for mass media such as feature films, television productions or video games. It is frequently a freelance profession.

Screenwriters are responsible for researching the story, developing the narrative, writing the screenplay, and delivering it, in the required format, to development executives. Screenwriters therefore have great influence over the creative direction and emotional impact of the screenplay and, arguably, of the finished film. They either pitch original ideas to producers in the hope that they will be optioned or sold, or screenwriters are commissioned by a producer to create a screenplay from a concept, true story, existing screen work or literary work, such as a novel, poem, play, comic book or short story.

1 Types

The act of screenwriting takes many forms across the entertainment industry. Often, multiple writers work on the same script at different stages of development with different tasks. Over the course of a successful career, a screenwriter might be hired to write in a wide variety of roles.

Some of the most common forms of screenwriting jobs include:

1.1 Spec script writing

Spec scripts are feature film or television show scripts written on speculation, without the commission of a film studio, production company, or TV network. The content is usually invented solely by the screenwriter, though spec screenplays can also be based on established works, or real people and events.[1] The spec script is a Hollywood sales tool. The vast majority of scripts written each year are spec scripts, but only a small percentage make it to the screen.[2] A spec script is usually a wholly original work, but can also be an adaptation.

In television writing, a spec script is a sample teleplay written to demonstrate the writer's knowledge of a show and ability to imitate its style and conventions. It is submitted to the show's producers in hopes of being hired to write future episodes of the show. Budding screenwriters attempting to break into the business generally begin by writing one or more spec scripts.

Although writing spec scripts is part of any writer's career, the Writers Guild of America forbids members to write "on speculation." The distinction is that a "spec script" is written as a sample by the writer on his or her own; what is forbidden is writing a script for a specific producer without a contract. In addition to writing a script on speculation, it is generally not advised to write camera angles or other directional terminology, as these are likely to be ignored. A director may write up a shooting script himself or herself, a script that guides the team in what to do in order to carry out the director's vision of how the script should look. The director may ask the original writer to co-write it with him or her, or to rewrite a script that satisfies both the director and producer of the film/TV show.

1.2   Commissioned screenplay

A commissioned screenplay is written by a hired writer. The concept is usually developed long before the screenwriter is brought on, and often has multiple writers work on it before the script is given a green light.[3]

1.3   Feature assignment writing

Scripts written on assignment are screenplays created under contract with a studio, production company, or producer. These are the most common assignments sought after in screenwriting. A screenwriter can get an assignment either exclusively or from "open" assignments. A screenwriter can also be approached and offered an assignment. Assignment scripts are generally adaptations of an existing idea or property owned by the hiring company,[4] but can also be original works based on a concept created by the writer or producer.

1.4   Rewriting and script doctoring

Most produced films are rewritten to some extent during the development process. Frequently, they are not rewritten by the original writer of the script.[5] Many established screenwriters, as well as new writers whose work shows promise but lacks marketability, make their living rewriting scripts.

When a script's central premise or characters are good but the script is otherwise unusable, a different writer or team of writers is contracted to do an entirely new draft, often referred to as a "page one rewrite." When only small problems remain, such as bad dialogue or poor humor, a writer is hired to do a "polish" or "punch-up".

Depending on the size of the new writer's contributions, screen credit may or may not be given. For instance, in the American film industry, credit to rewriters is given only if 50% or more of the script is substantially changed.[6] These standards can make it difficult to establish the identity and number of screenwriters who contributed to a film's creation.

When established writers are called in to rewrite portions of a script late in the development process, they are commonly referred to as script doctors. Prominent script doctors include Steve Zaillian, William Goldman, Robert Towne, Mort Nathan, Quentin Tarantino and Peter Russell.[7] Many up-and-coming screenwriters work as ghost writers.

1.5   Television writing

A freelance television writer typically uses spec scripts or previous credits and reputation to obtain a contract to write one or more episodes for an existing television show.

After an episode is submitted, rewriting or polishing may be required.

A staff writer for a TV show generally works in-house, writing and rewriting episodes. Staff writers—often given other titles, such as story editor or producer—work both as a group and individually on episode scripts to maintain the show's tone, style, characters, and plots.[8]

Television show creators write the television pilot and bible of new television series. They are responsible for creating and managing all aspects of a show's characters, style, and plots. Frequently, a creator remains responsible for the show's day-to-day creative decisions throughout the series run as show runner, head writer or story editor.

1.5.1   Writing for daily series

The process of writing for soap operas and telenovelas is different from that used by prime time shows, due in part to the need to produce new episodes five days a week for several months. In one example cited by Jane Espenson, screenwriting is a "sort of three-tiered system":[9]

> a few top writers craft the overall story arcs. Mid-level writers work with them to turn those arcs into things that look a lot like traditional episode outlines, and an array of writers below that (who do not even have to be local to Los Angeles), take those outlines and quickly generate the dialogue while adhering slavishly to the outlines.

Espenson notes that a recent trend has been to eliminate the role of the mid-level writer, relying on the senior writers to do rough outlines and giving the other writers a bit more freedom. Regardless, when the finished scripts are sent to the top writers, the latter do a final round of rewrites. Espenson also notes that a show that airs daily, with characters who have decades of history behind their voices, necessitates a writing staff without the distinctive voice that can sometimes be present in prime-time series.[9]

1.5.2   Writing for game shows

Game shows feature live contestants, but still use a team of writers as part of a specific format.[10] This may involve the slate of questions and even specific phrasing or dialogue on the part of the host. Writers may not script the dialogue used by the contestants, but they work with the producers to create the actions, scenarios, and sequence of events that support the game show's concept.

1.6 Video game writing

With the continued development and increased complexity of video games, many opportunities are available to employ screenwriters in the field of video game design. Video game writers work closely with the other game designers to create characters, scenarios, and dialogue.[11]

2 Theories on writing a screenplay

Fundamentally, the screenplay is a unique literary form. It is like a musical score, in that it is intended to be interpreted on the basis of other artists' performance, rather than serving as a finished product for the enjoyment of its audience. For this reason, a screenplay is written using technical jargon and tight, spare prose when describing stage directions. Unlike a novel or short story, a screenplay focuses on describing the literal, visual aspects of the story, rather than on the internal thoughts of its characters. In screenwriting, the aim is to evoke those thoughts and emotions through subtext, action, and symbolism.[12]

Several main screenwriting theories help writers approach the screenplay by systematizing the structure, goals and techniques of writing a script. The most common kinds of theories are structural. Screenwriter William Goldman is widely quoted as saying "Screenplays are structure".

2.1 Three-act structure

Main article: Three-act structure

The three acts are setup (of the location and characters), confrontation (with an obstacle), and resolution (culminating in a climax and a dénouement). In a two-hour film, the first and third acts both typically last around 30 minutes, with the middle act lasting roughly an hour.

In *Writing Drama*, French writer and director Yves Lavandier shows a slightly different approach.[13] As do most theorists, he maintains that every human action, whether fictitious or real, contains three logical parts: before the action, during the action, and after the action. But since the climax is part of the action, Yves Lavandier maintains that the second act must include the climax, which makes for a much shorter third act than is found in most screenwriting theories.

Besides the three-act structure, it is also common to use a four- or five-act structure in a screenplay, though certain screenplays may include as many as twenty separate acts.

2.2 The Hero's Journey

The hero's journey, also referred to as the monomyth, is an idea formulated by noted mythologist Joseph Camp-

bell. The central concept of the monomyth is that a pattern can be seen in stories and myths across history. Campbell defined and explained that pattern in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949).

Campbell's insight was that important myths from around the world, which have survived for thousands of years, all share a fundamental structure. This fundamental structure contains a number of stages, which include

1. **a call to adventure**, which the hero has to accept or decline,

2. **a road of trials**, on which the hero succeeds or fails,

3. **achieving the goal (or "boon")**, which often results in important self-knowledge,

4. **a return to the ordinary world**, which again the hero can succeed or fail, and

5. **application of the boon,** in which what the hero has gained can be used to improve the world.

Later, screenwriter Christopher Vogler refined and expanded the hero's journey for the screenplay form in his book, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (1993).

2.3 Syd Field's Paradigm

In his book *Screenplay* Syd Field posited a new theory, which he called the Paradigm. Field noticed that in a 120-page screenplay, Act Two was notoriously boring, and was also twice the length of Acts One and Three. He also noticed that an important dramatic event usually occurred at the middle of the picture, which implied to him that the middle act was actually two acts in one. So the Three Act Structure is notated 1, 2a, 2b, 3, resulting in Aristotle's Three Acts divided into four pieces.

Field also introduced the idea of Plot Points into screenwriting theory. Plot Points are important structural functions that happen in approximately the same place in most successful movies, like the verses and choruses in a popular song. In subsequent books, Field has added to his original list, and students of his like Viki King and Linda Seger have added to the list of Plot Points. Here is a current list of the major Plot Points that are congruent with Field's Paradigm:

Opening Image: The first image in the screenplay should summarize the entire film, especially its tone. Often, writers go back and redo this as the last thing before submitting the script.

Exposition: Provides some background information to the audience about the plot, characters' histories, setting, and theme.

Inciting Incident: Also called the catalyst, this is the point in the story when the Protagonist encounters the

problem that will change their life. This is when the detective is assigned the case, where Boy meets Girl, and where the Comic Hero gets fired from his cushy job, forcing him into comic circumstances.

Plot Point 1: The last scene in Act One, Plot Point 1 is a surprising development that radically changes the Protagonist's life, and forces him to confront the Opponent. In *Star Wars*, this is when Luke's family is killed by the Empire. He has no home to go back to, so he joins the Rebels in opposing Darth Vader.

Pinch 1: A reminder scene at about 3/8 the way through the script (halfway through Act 2a) that brings up the central conflict of the drama, reminding us of the overall conflict. For example, in *Star Wars*, Pinch 1 is the Stormtroopers attacking the Millennium Falcon in Mos Eisley, reminding us the Empire is after the stolen plans to the Death Star R2-D2 is carrying and Luke and Ben Kenobi are trying to get to the Rebel Alliance (the main conflict).

Midpoint: An important scene in the middle of the script, often a reversal of fortune or revelation that changes the direction of the story. Field suggests that driving the story towards the Midpoint keeps the second act from sagging.

Pinch 2: Another reminder scene about 5/8 through the script (halfway through Act 2b) that is somehow linked to Pinch 1 in reminding the audience about the central conflict. In *Star Wars*, Pinch 2 is the Stormtroopers attacking them as they rescue the Princess in the Death Star. Both scenes remind us of the Empire's opposition, and using the Stormtrooper attack motif unifies both Pinches.

Plot Point 2: A dramatic reversal that ends Act 2 and begins Act 3, which is about confrontation and resolution. Sometimes Plot Point 2 is the moment when the Hero has had enough and is finally going to face the Opponent. Sometimes, like in *Toy Story*, it's the low-point for the Hero, and he must bounce back to overcome the odds in Act 3.

Showdown: About midway through Act 3, the Protagonist will confront the Main Problem of the story and either overcome it, or come to a tragic end.

Resolution: The issues of the story are resolved.

Tag: An epilogue, tying up the loose ends of the story, giving the audience closure. This is also known as denouement. In general, films in recent decades have had longer denouements than films made in the 1970s or earlier.

2.4   The sequence approach

The sequence approach to screenwriting, sometimes known as "eight-sequence structure," is a system developed by Frank Daniel, while he was the head of the Graduate Screenwriting Program at USC. It is based in part on

the fact that, in the early days of cinema, technical matters forced screenwriters to divide their stories into sequences, each the length of a reel (about ten minutes).[14]

The sequence approach mimics that early style. The story is broken up into eight 10-15 minute sequences. The sequences serve as "mini-movies", each with their own compressed three-act structure. The first two sequences combine to form the film's first act. The next four create the film's second act. The final two sequences complete the resolution and dénouement of the story. Each sequence's resolution creates the situation which sets up the next sequence.

3   Dialogue and description

The following is an example from an unproduced screenplay which may give the reader an idea of how a scene without camera angles can be descriptive, and perhaps even poetic, so as to convey the proper time frame (1910) and ambiance:

A BUNCH OF GARDENIAS makes a sudden burst of BRIGHT RED. A hand removes each petal—one at a time. The petals fall on the ground. Following the petals- - A part of a woman's SHOE is seen. It is strangely ornate with a shabby heel. Giggles erupt, and the extravagantly painted face of a very young prostitute appears. Her hand is at the arm of a man who is older by at least a couple of decades.

3.1   Imagery

Imagery can be used in many metaphoric ways. In *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, the title character talked of wanting to close the door on himself sometime, and then, in the end, he did. Pathetic fallacy is also frequently used; rain to express a character feeling depressed, sunny days promote a feeling of happiness and calm. Imagery can be used to sway the emotions of the audience and to clue them in to what is happening.

Imagery is well defined in *City of God*. The opening image sequence sets the tone for the entire film. The film opens with the shimmer of a knife's blade on a sharpening stone. A drink is being prepared, The knife's blade shows again, juxtaposed is a shot of a chicken letting loose of its harness on its feet. All symbolising 'The One that got away'. The film is about life in the favelas in Rio - sprinkled with violence and games and ambition.

3.2   Dialogue

Dialogue can be very important to the film industry, because there are no written words to explain the characters or plot; it all has to be explained through dialogue and imagery. Bollywood and other Indian film industries

use separate dialogue writers in addition to the screenplay writers.

3.3 Plot

See also: Act structure

While the story is what will be told (narrative); the plot is how the story will be told (narration). This vocabulary is not indisputable for sometimes in literature stories and plots are used exactly the other way around.

4 Screenwriting education

A number of universities offer specialized Master of Fine Arts and undergraduate programs in screenwriting, including USC, DePaul University, American Film Institute, Loyola Marymount University, Chapman University, NYU, and the University of the Arts.

Some schools offer non-degree screenwriting programs, such as the TheFilmSchool, The International Film and Television School Fast Track, and the UCLA Professional / Extension Programs in Screenwriting.

New York Film Academy offers both degree and non-degree educational systems with campuses all around the world.

Many screenwriters choose to pursue screenwriting independently with free online educational resources such as ScreenCraft, NoFilmSchool, The Black List, John August's Script Notes podcast, and Julie Gray's Just Effing Entertain Me.[15][16]

5 Screenwriting portrayed in film

Screenwriting has been the focus of a number of films:

- *Crashing Hollywood* (1931)—A screenwriter collaborates on a gangster movie with a real-life gangster. When the film is released, the mob doesn't like how accurate the movie is.[17]

- *Sunset Boulevard* (1950)—Actor William Holden portrays a hack screenwriter forced to collaborate on a screenplay with a desperate, fading silent film star, played by Gloria Swanson.

- *In a Lonely Place* (1950)—Humphrey Bogart is a washed up screenwriter who gets framed for murder.

- *Paris, When it Sizzles* (1964)—William Holden plays a drunk screenwriter who has wasted months partying and has just two days to finish his script. He hires Audrey Hepburn to help.

- *Barton Fink* (1991)—John Turturro plays a naïve New York playwright who comes to Hollywood with high hopes and great ambition. While there, he meets one of his writing idols, a celebrated novelist from the past who has become a drunken hack screenwriter (a character based on William Faulkner).

- *Mistress* (1992)—In this comedy written by Barry Primus and J. F. Lawton, Robert Wuhl is a screenwriter/director who's got integrity, vision, and a serious script - but no career. Martin Landau is a sleazy producer who introduces Wuhl to Robert De Niro, Danny Aiello and Eli Wallach - three guys willing to invest in the movie, but with one catch: each one wants his mistress to be the star.

- *The Player* (1992)—In this satire of the Hollywood system, Tim Robbins plays a movie producer who thinks he's being blackmailed by a screenwriter whose script was rejected.

- *Adaptation.* (2002)—Nicolas Cage portrays real-life screenwriter Charlie Kaufman (as well as his fictional brother, Donald) as Kaufman struggles to adapt an esoteric book (Susan Orlean's real-life non-fiction work *The Orchid Thief*) into an action-filled Hollywood screenplay.[18]

- *Dreams on Spec* (2007)—The only documentary to follow aspiring screenwriters as they struggle to turn their scripts into movies, the film also features wisdom from established scribes like James L. Brooks, Nora Ephron, Carrie Fisher, and Gary Ross.[19]

- *Seven Psychopaths* (2012)—In this satire, written and directed by Martin McDonagh, Colin Farrell plays a screenwriter who is struggling to finish his screenplay *Seven Psychopaths*, but finds unlikely inspiration after his best friend steals a Shih Tzu owned by a vicious gangster.

6 Copyright protection

6.1 United States

In the United States, completed works may be copyrighted, but ideas and plots may not be. Any document written after 1978 in the U.S. is automatically copyrighted even without legal registration or notice. However, the Library of Congress will formally register a screenplay. U.S. Courts will not accept a lawsuit alleging that a defendant is infringing on the plaintiff's copyright in a work until the plaintiff registers the plaintiff's claim to those copyrights with the Copyright Office.[20] This means that a plaintiff's attempts to remedy an infringement will be delayed during the registration process.[21] Additionally, in many infringement cases,

the plaintiff will not be able recoup attorney fees or collect statutory damages for copyright infringement, unless the plaintiff registered before the infringement began.[22] For the purpose of establishing evidence that a screenwriter is the author of a particular screenplay (but not related to the legal copyrighting status of a work), the Writers Guild of America registers screenplays. However, since this service is one of record keeping and is not regulated by law, a variety of commercial and non-profit organizations exist for registering screenplays. Protection for teleplays, formats, as well as screenplays may be registered for instant proof-of-authorship by third-party assurance vendors, such as the Creators Vault.

There is a line of precedent in several states (including California and New York) that allows for "idea submission" claims, based on the notion that submission of a screenplay (or even a mere pitch for one) to a studio under very particular sets of factual circumstances could potentially give rise to an implied contract to pay for the ideas embedded in that screenplay, even if an alleged derivative work does not actually infringe the screenplay author's copyright.[23] The unfortunate side effect of such precedents (which were supposed to protect screenwriters) is that it is now that much harder to break into screenwriting. Naturally, motion picture and television production firms responded to such precedents by categorically declining to read *all* unsolicited screenplays from unknown writers; accepting screenplays only through official channels like talent agents, managers, and attorneys; and forcing screenwriters to sign broad legal releases before their screenplays will be actually accepted, read, or considered.[23]

7   See also

- Writing section from the MovieMakingManual (MMM) Wikibook.
- Closet screenplay
- List of film-related topics
- Outline of film
- Prelap
- Screenplay
- Screenwriting guru
- Storyboard

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[4] Lydia Willen and Joan Willen, *How to Sell your Screenplay*, pg 242. Square One Publishers, 2001.

[5] Skip Press, *The Ultimate Writer's Guide to Hollywood*, pg xiii. Barnes and Noble Books, 2004.

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[7] Virginia Wright Wetman. "Success Has 1,000 Fathers (So Do Films)". *The New York Times*. May 28, 1995. Arts section, p.16.

[8] TV Writer.com from tvwriter.com

[9] 08/13/2008: Soapy Scenes, from "Jane in Progress" a blog for aspiring screenwriters by Jane Espenson

[10] 05/15/2010: Writers Guild of America, Reality & Game Show Writers

[11] Skip Press, *The Ultimate Writer's Guide to Hollywood*, pg207. Barnes and Noble Books, 2004.

[12] Trottier, David: "The Screenwriter's Bible", pg4. Silman James, 1998.

[13] Excerpt on the three-act structure from Yves Lavandier's *Writing Drama*

[14] Gulino, Paul Joseph: "Screenwriting: The Sequence Approach", pg3. Continuum, 2003.

[15] Gary, Julie (2013). *Just Effing Entertain Me*. Julie Gray. ISBN 9781304404831. A comprehensive guide to screenwriting with proven methods to help you test your ideas BEFORE you write your script, outlining tricks that make every page fascinating, chapters on character development, dialogue, theme

[16] "Julie Gary". Huffington Post. A Hollywood refugee living in the Middle East, Julie Gary has authored two books and is working on a memoir. A former Hollywood story analyst who has taught at Warner Bros., Julie now works with entrepreneurs, writers and innovators world wide-to shape narrative, edit stories and bridge the gap between art and commerce.

[17] "Internet Movie Database listing of Crashing Hollywood".

[18] "Interview with Charlie Kaufman". chasingthefrog.com.

[19] "Los Angeles Times, July 18, 2007, "Like the lottery: Someone wins," p. 4.".

[20] 17 USC 411 (United States Code, Title 17, Section 411)

[21] U.S. Copyright Office Circular 1

[22] 17 USC 412

[23] Donald E. Biederman; Edward P. Pierson; Martin E. Silfen; Janna Glasser; Charles J. Biederman; Kenneth J. Abdo; Scott D. Sanders (November 2006). *Law and Business of the Entertainment Industries* (5th ed.). Greenwood Publishing Group. pp. 313–327. ISBN 9780275992057.

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9   External links

- Screenwriting at DMOZ

- Screenwriters Lectures: Screenwriters on Screenwriting Series at BAFTA

- The Writers Guild of America

- American Screenwriters Association

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10.2   Images

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