

THE MECHANICS OF A SCREENPLAY

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THE MECHANICS OF A SCREENPLAY

As in any form of writing, the screenplay has one vital role – to conjure up images. So the golden rule of SHOW DON'T TELL is paramount.

A novel is written for readers and is primarily a private affair. Screenplays are for an audience. Audience for a screenplay means for the reader, agent, film crew, director etc. This is then translated into moving images for a wider audience that is a shared event. But first you must write it for one person in mind - YOU.

WRITE the movie that you want TO WATCH.

Secondly you write the best screenplay you can to capture the imagination of an agent or studio reader. If you get past these folks, you have a fighting chance of going all the way.

The way to get there is to do three things:

1. Correct format
2. Exceptional writing
3. Exciting visuals

This series will show you the steps to get your screenplay started and completed. There are rules to follow. Some are hard and fast – set in concrete by the industry because they work. If they work – they generate money. Some rules are loose where imagination and creative writing can pull in a reader who says 'this may be worth looking at.'

To build anything you need a solid foundation. The mechanics will be your foundation stones. On top of these you place the ideas and build until the structure is complete. There is nothing like your building – it is unique.

FORMAT

SOFTWARE

There are great programmes in the market place that will auto-format for you. These programmes will allow you to type and release you from the burden of formatting each line. FINAL DRAFT is a great writer's tool with lots of features and templates from studios. There are free downloads as well such as CELTX. If you want to do it the old fashioned way, Microsoft Word has templates that will enable formatting for screenplays.

Format for screenplay has been tried and tested over the last ninety years. Studios know what works and generates money. They will not be fooled. Stray from the format and it doesn't even get read.

TYPEFACE or FONT

Courier 12pt. The old typewriter font is used because studios know roughly how many words are on a page. You give them 120 page script and they know to the nearest 1000th how many words there are. Some are now accepting ARIEL 12pt but safer to stay with courier. You will find this font is the default on most programmes for that reason. Always check before submitting what the desired font is.

TIME

Film script = 1 minute/1 page

TV script = 30-40 seconds/1 page

Radio script = 150 words/1 minute (due to the nature of radio being heard once, the cast speak slower and pronounce more so the listener gets everything first time).

For this series I will concentrate on film scripts only. The mechanics will be the same, just subtle differences exist when writing for TV. TV scripts have a climax at the end of each act and breaks are written in. Film is straight through to the end.

PAPER

UK uses standard A4 (210mm x 297mm)

US uses 8 1/2" x 11"

SCENE HEADINGS

INT	interior
EXT	exterior
INT/EXT	interior shot but looking out
EXT/INT	exterior shot but looking in

The first thing a production crew may look at is the budget. Interior shots are cheaper than exterior ones. Exterior involves location shooting and more money. Interior can be shot in a studio and doesn't necessarily have to be night or day shots. The boundaries stretch further. The more interior shots to your screenplay – the more chance of having it read.

INT/EXT shots, for example, may be where the camera is in a house, looking at the action in the garden. A car, where the cop is leaning in to take the license, etc.

EXT/INT is the opposite way. It may be a shot of a burglar whose point of view is the handbag he can see through a window.

SPECIFIC LOCATIONS:

INT. CASEY'S HOUSE

EXT. CASEY'S HOUSE

These general locations show where you are. Where the action takes place in a certain part of the house. You have to be more specific.

INT. CASEY'S HOUSE/BASEMENT

TIME:

DAY or NIGHT will suffice unless your scene demands to be specific. In which case you will use ...

DAWN, MORNING, AFTERNOON, DUSK, SOME TIME LATER, CONTINUOUS.

INT. CASEY'S HOUSE/BASEMENT – NIGHT

Set the scene and describe the action. We know it is night even though we do not see the sky. The next scene will show more ...

EXT. CASEY'S HOUSE – NIGHT

Using the simple DAY and NIGHT is the best solution.

In one of my screenplays I used DAWN and DUSK too as a way of coding. I showed the breakdown of a 40 year marriage by showing all the good days in DAY shots all the way through to NIGHT shots to show the decline.

DIALOGUE

Dialogue is said by a CHARACTER. You cannot divide the two.
Dialogue is said in certain ways, this is shown by PARENTHESIS.
Dialogue is said with ACTION.

These three are so closely linked that I am going to put them all together under one heading. For a screenplay, dialogue is written in lower case and single line space.

Dialogue should always follow the character's name, maybe not immediately because of the parenthesis, but once CHARACTER has been typed, something must be said.

MAIRI	(character)
(angry)	(parenthesis)
How dare you accuse me of stealing.	(dialogue)

She attempts to slap CASEY but he catches her wrist. He holds her hand before letting go. He walks away. She throws a vase. CRACK. Casey crumples to the floor as the vase hits his head. (action)

This is the main way of stating dialogue. In screenplays you will see or use other tags such as:

MAIRI (o/s) this means she speaks off screen. You can hear but not see her.

MAIRI (v.o) means voice over. This is narration where the script is spoken while the drama unfolds. Shawshank Redemption and Goodfellas both use this method. It may be that Casey is reading a letter written by Mairi and we hear her voice saying the words.

CASEY and MAIRI (m.o.s) is used sparingly. It may be used in TV dramas where action is unfolding and the two characters are in the background talking but can't be heard. Four Weddings And A Funeral use this when Hugh Grant talks to his brother who is deaf. They both use sign language and m.o.s is used. We know they are communicating but cannot hear anything. Also they are part of the scene but in the background.

Dialogue should try and be kept from the opening page. Allow the first page to describe the action, the place, characters, etc. SHOW DON'T TELL. Read Paul Schrader's TAXI DRIVER opening page and you will get the feel of Robert De Niro's character. It is one of the most brilliant pieces of script writing I have read.

CHARACTERS

Names appear in caps above the dialogue. Names also appear in caps the first time appearing in the script. Any other time they are written normal lower case.

MAIRI walks into CASEY's house. Casey is waiting for her. Mairi pulls a gun. BANG. Casey crumples to the floor

PARENTHESIS

Parentheses are used in different ways. They tell the actor how the words are spoken and who they are spoken to. They are typed in lower case.

CASEY
(he grabs a knife and points it at Mairi)
I'm gonna kill ya—a slow painful death.

The example above puts action in the parenthesis brackets. This is incorrect and should be written as action.

CASEY
I'm gonna kill—a slow painful death

He grabs a knife and points it at Mairi.

Or, you can add a parenthesis to show how he says it.

CASEY
(calmly)
I'm gonna kill ya—a slow painful death.

This shows the actor how to deliver the line. If there are several characters in the scene and dialogue is directed at only one person then a parenthesis may show it like this:

CASEY (character)
(to Chris) (parenthesis)
I'm gonna kill her—a slow painful death. (dialogue)

He grabs a knife and walks toward her. (action)

TRANSITIONS

ALWAYS start your play with FADE IN: and end with FADE OUT:

You may use these two in your play if you wish. If you fade out on a scene make sure you fade in again.

Other transitions that you may come across are ...

CUT TO
FADE TO
DISSOLVE TO
FADE TO BLACK
BACK TO
MATCH CUT TO
JUMP CUT
SMASH CUT

These will all do different jobs and tell the director what to do differently. That is one of the problems. It is your play but the director's film. I tend to leave all the transitions out of my plays or just use CUT TO:

Only in one of the scripts that I wrote I used FADE TO BLACK and FADE IN because I wanted a black screen with gold handwriting. Generally it is easier to stick to CUT TO.

So ...

FADE IN:

CASEY and MAIRI meet in the disused warehouse. Water drips from holes in the roof and oily puddles cover the floor.

(screenplay.....)

Casey walks away with the money. He laughs as he sees Mairi lying in a pool of blood. He shakes his head.

CASEY
(mocking)
Don't mess with the dude.

The footsteps from his cowboy boots ECHO in the empty warehouse.

FADE OUT:

MONTAGE

At some point in a screenplay you may wish to have lots of scenes tied together. There may be no dialogue but the bridging scenes are part of the story.

Example: You are writing a war film. Soldiers are coming off the landing craft and hitting the beaches. Grenades, mortars and crossfire from pillboxes are happening all at once. How do you show it? One way would be a montage – a series of shots designed to get the reader from one key scene to the next key scene. So, how do you write the montage? One acceptable way would be like this:

- A. Landing craft bounce on the waves and near the beach. Soldiers are lined up like sardines.
- B. Germans look out from the pill box towards the landing craft. The hatches open.
- C. The soldiers pour out and start wading into the surf.
- D. The Germans open fire as the shoreline is filled with American soldiers.
- E. The soldiers take cover behind dunes and dead soldiers.

EXT. BEACH - DAY

Sergeant Ross looks at his men and

You get the idea. The action is fast paced and shows the POV (point of view) of both armies. Even though the main story is about Sergeant Ross, we need to see the enemy POV to give empathy. A montage of shots can do this.

SAMPLE

FADE IN:

INT. CASEY'S HOME - DAY

CASEY and DARYL sit opposite each other. Daryl has his hands tied at the back. Casey stares at him while stroking a gun.

Daryl soils his trousers.

Casey grins.

DARYL

W-what you gonna do?

CASEY

Tell me where the money is.

DARYL

Don't know about the money.

CASEY

Mairi's gonna be here soon. You better have the right answers for her.

He looks at his watch.

The door crashes open.

MAIRI enters followed by two HENCHMEN.

MAIRI

Has he talked yet C?

CASEY

No. Tried talkin sense to him but he ain't listening.

MAIRI

Is that the case?

She looks toward the case that one of her bodyguards carries. He opens it up on the table. Various instruments of torture line the case.

MAIRI (CONT'D)

Where shall we start?

She takes the drill from the case and adjusts the torque setting for double speed.

SCREENPLAY MODEL

ACT 1 – CONFLICT AND MINOR CLIMAX– 30 MINUTES

1-2 minutes.

The hook

3-5 minutes.

The line which sums up the movie.

4-10 minutes.

Information. Who are the main characters and especially the protagonist. What your story is going to be about the dramatic circumstances surrounding your story. The genre.

11-15 minutes.

The protagonist in action. The attitude and personality. Who is he/she. What trials will show this. The main sub-plot must kick off.

16-30 minutes.

The inciting incident. What is the worst thing that could happen to the character that could turn out for the good OR what is the best thing that turn out for the worst. Does it set up the incident for Act 3.

28-30 minutes.

The climax for Act 1. A crisis is resolved one way or another. The protagonist responds or reacts. Their original goal is altered or forced to be altered for a while

ACT 2 – DEVELOPMENT AND MAJOR CLIMAX - 60 MINUTES

A breathing space for the audience after the first climax and resolution. Start building towards the second climax.

30-45 minutes.

Reaction and responses and setting up of incidents that lead to further problems. Relationships start to suffer and complications mar the route.

45 minutes.

First focus point. Remind the audience of the storyline. Push the story onward. Start or hint at character change or growth.

46-60 minutes.

The protagonist gets stronger. The obstacles get tougher. The protagonist reaches the point of no return.

60 minutes.

The half way point. The protagonist's moment of total commitment. Does he/she give up or push on. To give the character a new goal under pressure.

To take control where there was none. Just surviving to finding a solution. Living in a dream to finding reality.

61-75 minutes.

To make the character do what must be done – to go forward to the resolution of his commitment.

75 minutes.

Focus point 2. Reinforce the commitment that he made at min 60. Add another clue to suggest the solution to the problem. Test the new growth of the protagonist.

76-90 minutes.

Complications. He is tested in the new found growth and found lacking the necessary skills to go on. He must be pushed on to resolve the story. Setback leads to...

85-90 minutes.

The moment of truth and climax 2. A clear goal so that he knows where he must go. It leads us logically to the final climax. The setback is turned on its head and throws us into ...

ACT 3 – GRAND CLIMAX AND RESOLUTION – 30 MINUTES

90–114 minutes.

Resolve all problems posed by Act 1. Provide a satisfying ending. Clarity of purpose. Strong willed and totally changed from the person he was.

115-120 minutes.

Resolve the main plot. Show through action his total transformation. Play out the theme of the script.

118-120 minutes.

Pause for reflection after the climax. Tie up all the loose ends. Remember the key line from 3rd minute and seize it. Create a sense of afterlife even though it is not shown. The hero has won even at great cost to his own mental/emotional/physical cost. He is a better person than he was to start with.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daryl Baldwin

Daryl Baldwin lives in England. He is married and has three children. He spends his time moderating the Short Story Library forum and as Associate Editor on the Short Story Library E-Zine.

Screenplays:

The Torn Letter

The Fall Of Rome

Novels:

All Things Under The Sun

Non-Fiction:

Dear Children (The Third Letter Of John)

Pamphlets:

Paul's Letter To Philemon

Poems:

Aiming High

Bad Trip

Micro Fiction:

Father's Day

The Tramp

The Birthday Present