

Screenwriting 101

Your Ultimate 10-Minute Guide

<https://industrialscripts.com/screenwriting-guide/>

Whether you are new to screenwriting or a seasoned scriptwriter, there always comes a time in your screenwriting career when you find yourself struggling.

This can prove to be a difficult time for any creative, but the nature of screenwriting is such that there are always certain base rules and formulas to fall back on. Obviously, it's important to ride a line – following every rule in the book too religiously nets you a pretty formulaic script. There's always room for a little flair. Equally, these formulas exist for a reason – they work.

The Basic Screenwriting Formula

All screenplays (believe it or not, even the idiosyncratic ones) follow a broad formula, and they follow it perhaps a little more closely than other storytelling media because of, among other things, time.

A film's story unfolds across 90-120 minutes (usually). This places certain pressures on narrative structure that other media don't have to stick to quite as rigidly.

As Robert McKee puts it:

"All writing is discipline, but screenwriting is a drill sergeant."

At its most basic level, a story in film concerns a central character or characters, a drastic change in their lives that presents some form of choice or goal, and then their subsequent attempts and/or failures in response to that change/goal.

This is story at the atomic level, and it's rare to find a film that doesn't adhere to it in some form or other. Obviously, it isn't the be-all and end-all of story, but it allows for neat, dramatic structures in which we set up a character's world, shake that world to its core, and force them into making drastic, affecting choices.

Little blueprints like this help because screenwriting isn't just whatever comes to you; you need to use all the right ingredients.

The Screenwriter: A Master of Mixing Ingredients

Paul Schrader, writer of 1976 classic TAXI DRIVER, has some well-known words of wisdom:

"I could be just a writer very easily. I am not a writer – I am a screenwriter, which is half a filmmaker..."

This is one of the most important tenets of screenwriting: you're writing prospectively. You're writing something that is ultimately going to be audio-visual, and that has a whole host of implications. You, as a screenwriter, have certain obligations to fulfil:

You must follow universal scriptwriting conventions;

- Format your script correctly;
- You must strive to meet the demands of the people you're initially writing your script for: directors, producers;
- You must strive to meet the demands of the people you're ultimately writing the script for: your audience.

Revered Swedish writer-director Ingmar Bergman hits the nail square on the head:

"Film as dream, film as music. No form of art goes beyond ordinary consciousness as film does, straight to our emotions, deep into the twilight room of the soul..."

Again, it's a line – utilising the tools and formulas of the trade without showing them too clearly. That's how you immerse an audience.

Screenwriting: The All-Important Foundations

For the purpose of this guide, it is helpful to consider screenwriting in terms of building a house. You must start with strong foundations.

Build your house without these foundations and you'll find that you'll run into difficulties later on when you're putting the finishing touches to your house. Worse still, without the foundations your house is going to crumble and fall.

Screenwriting can be viewed in much the same way. When you build a house you have a blueprint – a methodology to follow.

Robert Altman, writer of *MASH* and *The Long Goodbye*, confirms this:

"I don't think screenplay writing is the same as writing — I mean, I think it's blueprinting".

Screenplay Structure

First comes structure: your script must follow a clear act structure, it should be properly sequenced and there should be a defined plot, meaning events should be causally linked to one another rather than a series of 'and then' sequential events. These form an important skeleton structure around which the rest of your script can be built.

A key element of structure in film is the idea of set-up and pay-off. It's one of the simplest and most common structural techniques in screenwriting and yet it's often either misused or forgotten entirely.

To take a simple example:

In 2017's *GET OUT*, we establish early on that victims of the 'Coagula process' are incapacitated by the flash of a camera, when Chris takes a photo of Dre during a party. When Chris finds himself under attack towards the end of the film, he uses this knowledge to incapacitate his attacker.

So, we set something up passively, then bring it back into the story when it proves useful or relevant.

Failing to set something up ahead of time can lead to a '*deus ex machina*', when the solution to our character's problems end up feeling like they come out of nowhere. If our protagonist is going to get out of a bind by using a knife hidden in their sock, we need to see them place the knife there earlier in the story. If we don't, it looks like a massive plot contrivance.

On the other side of the spectrum, failure to pay something off leaves us with the '*Chekhov's Gun*' problem. Why include something seemingly important if we're not going to use it?

The fundamental point here is this: in screenwriting, structure has to be cohesive, and set-up/pay-off is a clear example of this cohesion. Everything needs to have wider purpose in the story. If it doesn't, we don't need it to build the house.

Genre in Screenplays

But there's another foundational element at work in screenwriting – genre, the conceptual framework into which the story fits. Genre is about anticipation, a list of conventions and tropes that an audience comes to expect from a particular type of story:

- In a horror film we expect a group of people to face an insidious, often-supernatural threat. We expect at least some (probably most) to die.
- In fantasy we expect grandiose clashes between good and evil. We expect journeys, quests, swords, and a threat that has the potential to destroy or take over the world.
- In a romantic comedy we expect two characters to overcome their initial differences and forge a romantic relationship. Maybe they dramatically break up a wedding.

If a genre film doesn't deliver on these conventions, it disengages the potential audience. So, again, we reach that same formulaic problem as above – adhering to formula vs taking your script in an original direction.

As Robert McKee puts it:

"The challenge is to keep convention but avoid cliché."

The Concept or Premise Behind a Screenplay

Finally there's concept – the specific controlling idea or set of ideas that form the basis of the story.

A hapless businessman who accidentally discovers his boss is doing underhand deals with a national enemy. A musician struggling to find work in a world rendered deaf after a cataclysmic space something something. These are concepts.

So we have our three foundational pillars of screenwriting: structure, genre, concept. Of course, there's scope for originality in all three. But it's the final one that's the real key:

Stray too far from structural convention and your story can end up meandering aimlessly. Even fractured narratives like, say, PULP FICTION or MEMENTO tend to hit certain dramatic moments at the same points as linear ones.

Stray too far from genre convention and the story becomes unrecognisable. It becomes impossible to wield any control over audience expectation which makes it pretty much impossible to break those expectations.

Concept, however, doesn't really have a formula. It's the foundation that seeps inextricably into the other two. If your concept involves a retired assassin coming out of retirement to save his mother-in-law who happens to be the Vice President, that has:

- immediate genre implications (we're probably looking at an action thriller)
- which in turn have structural implications (our first act should most likely involve sketching out the protagonist's past, their skill, and the inciting kidnapping)

If there's a phrase that ultimately sums up the most effective approach to screenwriting, it's:

The same, but different

Fresh concepts, structures and blends of genres are never a bad thing, but it's by using existing formulas and conventions as a base that a screenwriter is able to take stories in noticeably new directions. **We have to set expectations to break them.**

Screenwriting: Bricks and Mortar. Once you have your sturdy screenwriting foundations in place you're ready to build the figurative walls in this extended, construction-related analogy.

Writing Characters to Lead and Support Your Story

This brings us to character. Of course, the foundations of the script have some influence here too – we have certain character expectations based on the core elements of the film.

We expect the detectives in a crime thriller to be consistently at odds with one another, and we expect their chief to be a bit caustic. Again, these expectations give us scope to do something new with our screenwriting. Far more important to character however, are motivations, goals, and obstacles. First, we need to know what a character wants...

This could be something grand and overarching like escaping their mundane life and fulfilling their destiny (Luke in STAR WARS) or something trivial and basic like replacing a ruined rug (THE BIG LEBOWSKI).

As THE SOCIAL NETWORK and THE WEST WING writer Aaron Sorkin puts it:

"Rather than tell the audience who a character is, I like to show the audience what a character wants."

Without knowing what it is a character wants, we have no real way of moving a story forward without barraging that character with a series of unrelated events to get a rise out of them.

This leaves us with a 'passive protagonist' and dull screenwriting.

A story in which:

a character is robbed of their life savings,
which forces them to take whatever work they can get,
work at which their corrupt boss manipulates them into helping him embezzle money from the company,
which in turn lands them in prison,
where they meet a guy who tells them he knows who has their money,
who gives it up out of fear when they finally confront him

...is one in which our protagonist isn't making any meaningful choices. Everything is happening to them. In a Screenplay, Your Characters Need Goals, Choices Obstacles and Flaws

Character Goals

Giving them a clear goal allows them to make choices in pursuit of that goal.

- Perhaps when the character is robbed of their money, they seek to hunt down the person who took it from them.
- This plunges them into a criminal underworld in which they must endear themselves to friends of the thief by assisting in a few crimes of their own.
- They end up quite liking some of their new acquaintances, but still manipulate them to get to their target.
- Ultimately they discover that the person who took their money did so to help his dying mother, and are faced with...
- a choice – take back what's theirs or accept that maybe they're no better than the thief, who needs it even more than they do.

Neither of these stories are particularly great, but in this version, our protagonist has a clear goal, takes steps to achieve it, and must deal with the consequences. This makes for a more engaging character and better screenwriting. They become active rather than remaining reactive.

Character Flaws

The other essential component of any character is a 'flaw'. Watching a perfect character tackling a problem perfectly and ending the narrative every bit as perfect as they perfectly started it isn't the foundation of anything close to drama. Again, it's a recipe for dull screenwriting.

For a character to be engaging, even likeable, they have to be deeply flawed. Even more importantly, this flaw has to relate in some way to their central goal. If our protagonist's central goal is to reunite with her estranged daughter, it's no use to us, dramatically speaking, if her biggest flaw is her inability to finish her novel.

These two things just aren't going to interact in any meaningful way. She needs to be someone too proud to apologise; someone whose own relationship with her mother has so damaged her that she visits on the same problems on her daughter.

A character's flaw needs to present a concrete obstacle to them achieving their goal.

The Scenes That Make Up a Screenplay

At their most basic, scenes pit two or more characters with opposing goals against one another, either explicitly (punching) or implicitly (indirect speech), and resolve when that minor conflict reaches its conclusion (another reason why 'goals' are so important).

These opposing goals can range from the overt (two characters trying to beat one another up) to the more subtle (a character tries to cheer up her brother; her brother wants to wallow in his misery), but the overarching point is this: scenes hinge on argument.

Having characters that consistently agree with one another will never be dramatic because it doesn't force conflict, change and resolution. This is why even in sweeping epics about good vs evil, we still have a multitude of smaller conflicts at work between the core 'good' characters.

STAR WARS wouldn't work if Luke, Han and Leia got on like a house on fire from day one. Nor would LORD OF THE RINGS if the fellowship did the same.

Conflict allows for growth. The events the characters go through feel more significant because we see those events change the characters, bring them together over time. A scene without conflict often feels either completely flat or obviously expository. Good screenwriting should seek to avoid either.

Writing Tone

Tone is often overlooked, but massively important in screenwriting. Again, this takes cues from everything above, from the script's genre, its structure, its characters. Tone is a bit of a nebulous term, but it's probably best described as the feel of a film, and it's something that it's essential to set up in any narrative world right away.

Think of it like this – if our story is set in a dark, dystopian world in which we follow a lone, young orphan girl struggling to survive on grim, futuristic streets, we probably don't want to open with a warm, funny moment.

Tone sets a precedent, and it's important to make sure it's the right one. These are the elements in which a screenwriter's voice, their flair, really has a chance to shine. Structural and generic conventions are key to any script, even those that seek to break the mold, but specific characters and moments ultimately come from the writer.

The (slightly drawn out) house analogy comes into its own again here: You want to build your foundations in a tried-and-tested way, as they're responsible for keeping the whole things standing, but when it comes to the actual appearance of the house, the height of the walls, the colour, the type of brick... ..the choice is yours.

Screenwriting: The Finished Article

If you have considered all of the above, then you should be on the way to starting your script. For a more in-depth look at the skills and processes required, it's worth taking an online screenwriting course.

If you encounter any issues during your screenwriting, then these wise words from Beat Generation author Jack Kerouac may be worth remembering:

"It ain't whatcha write, it's the way atcha write it."