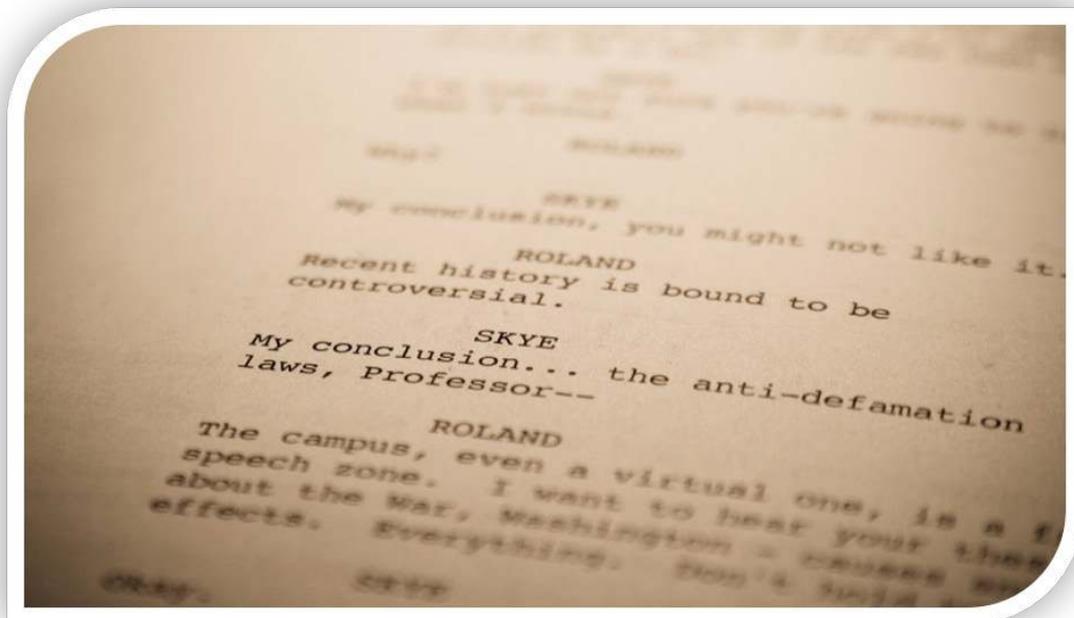


Creative Writing 1

Scriptwriting



Level HE4 - 40 CATS

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Welcome

About The Open College of the Arts (OCA)

OCA is a leading provider of flexible, open learning courses, a thriving educational charity, and part of the University for the Creative Arts (UCA). Founded in 1987 by Michael Young, Lord Young of Dartington, OCA's charitable purpose is to widen participation in arts education. We achieve this through embedding our values of openness and flexibility into how our courses are designed, structured and taught. This means producing high quality learning materials that are open and flexible enough for all students to have meaningful learning experiences, and a teaching model that allows you to work flexibly, where and when you want. Supporting this approach are tutors, who are experienced educators and creative practitioners, also working flexibly, and at a distance. UCA are a leading specialist arts institution that have validated the educational quality of OCA courses for many years.

About your course

Welcome to Creative Writing 1: Scriptwriting. This course will equip you with a writer's toolbox filled with the basics: how to lay out a script professionally; how to structure your screenplay; the dos and don'ts of writing compelling speech and dialogue; and breathing life into your characters. You'll pick up important screenwriting terms and techniques - and learn to watch lots of films in a critical and interrogative way. By the end of the course you'll not only have acquired the nuts and bolts of screenwriting but you'll also have penned your own 15-minute screenplay. You will have built up knowledge and experience of scriptwriting that you can carry forward into other media (radio, TV, stage), perhaps through progression to Creative Writing 2: Moving on with Scriptwriting.

As a Level 1 (HE4) course unit it introduces you to higher education study, and encourages you to develop a rigorous approach to acquiring a broad knowledge base; employ a range of specialised skills; evaluate information, using it to plan and develop investigative strategies and to determine solutions to a variety of unpredictable problems; and operate in a range of varied and specific contexts, taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs.

The course unit was written by experienced academics and creative practitioners in collaboration with OCA and aims to:

- introduce you to the basic techniques of writing for screen as a visual medium
- develop your understanding of the building blocks of screenwriting: the scene, the dramatic arc, character and dialogue
- enable you to create your own original screenplay
- develop your ability to employ reflective skills, absorb constructive feedback and re-draft your work accordingly.

The course unit is divided into Five Parts each with a series of projects, research tasks, exercises, and assignment.

You will be supported through the course unit by receiving formative feedback from a tutor, to help you develop your work. At the end of your course unit, if you are working towards a qualification, you will be able to submit for summative (formal) assessment.

The learning outcomes for the course are to:

- analyse and put into practice the basics of screenwriting
- access a writer's toolbox of techniques specifically related to writing for screen
- create a series of linked scenes demonstrating confident knowledge of scene, dramatic arc, character and dialogue
- write, redraft and complete 15 pages of original screenplay (an opening section of a long script or a 15 minute short film)
- critically appraise and revise your own work in response to constructive feedback.

By the end of the course, you will have built up knowledge and experience of scriptwriting that you can carry forward into other media (radio, TV, stage), perhaps through progression to *Creative Writing 2: Moving On With Scriptwriting*.

Getting started

If you are new to OCA and to distance learning, the following seven short exercises will help you get started. If you have already studied another HE4 or Foundation course with OCA, you may want to use this section as a refresher.

The exercises are designed to help you prepare for your course unit by establishing a learning log, setting up your working space and study schedule. They also prepare you for your initial contact with your tutor and to say hello to fellow students. You should be able to work through these reasonably quickly, and the time invested will help you throughout your studies.



Research task: Studying at HE

If you are a new or returning student, there are a number of things you can do to help support your study at higher education.

Visit OCA's WeAreOCA blog and read through some of the study tips section:

<https://weareoca.com/category/students/study-tips/>

These posts are regularly added to, so keep an eye open for new additions. You can also comment on existing posts, or contact OCA if you would like to see new posts on a specific subject.

You may want to undertake OCA's free Introduction to studying in HE course. This is a free online course that takes between five and ten hours to complete. It's designed to introduce you to some important concepts and practical techniques that will help you as you prepare to study in HE, possibly for the first time.

<https://www.oca-student.com/introduction-studying-he>

Being an OCA student

As a distance learning student you receive learning materials that take you through the content of each course unit. Your materials provide case studies, links to resources and suggested research, and are typically structured into five parts covering a number of different topics. Each part contains research tasks, exercises, and projects that encourages you to undertake your own research, make work, and reflect on your progress. Work your way through one part at a time in chronological order, undertaking any tasks and documenting your work as you go in your learning log. These tasks are designed to be as accessible as possible, so all students, regardless of their circumstances can participate. There is usually room to adjust tasks to suit your needs and this is something OCA can support you with. Once you complete a given part, you will submit a selection of your work and your learning log to your tutor, who will review it and provide you with formative feedback



Research task: Being a student

You will have received a current Student Handbook when you enrolled. Read through it to find out more about what OCA can offer you and how OCA works. Refer back to your Student Handbook if you have any questions at a later date.

The OCA student site [www.oca-student.com] will be a key resource for you during your studies with OCA, so take some time to familiarise yourself with it. Log onto the OCA student website and watch the video guide to using the website.

The OCA discuss site [<https://discuss.oca-student.com/>] helps to connect OCA students together.

Feedback from your tutor

Tutor feedback can be written or verbal, depending on what you would rather receive. Written feedback will be in the form of a PDF tutor report. Verbal feedback will be provided online through Google Meet or by telephone with a summary written by your tutor. All tutor feedback will be timely, well-grounded, constructive, and challenging. It will reflect on the work you have produced and provide pointers on how you can improve. Tutors provide feedback at the end of each part of the course unit.



Research task: The role of the tutor

You can find out more about the role of your tutor through watching this short video: [<https://vimeo.com/180282269>]

You may also want to find out what kind of practitioner your specific tutor is by looking at their profile: <https://www.oca.ac.uk/our-tutors/>

Tip: Reflecting on your feedback

It's important to reflect on feedback in your learning log, identifying what you feel are the key themes and areas for development. This will help you develop a better understanding of what you are taking from your feedback, help you develop a reflective approach to your studies, and help your tutor in how they tailor their feedback for you. If you're using a public facing blog, and want to quote from the feedback, please refer to 'your tutor' rather than by naming them personally. You should act on this feedback as you progress through the course unit and can rework any elements prior to submitting for assessment.

Assessment

Once you have completed each part of the course and received feedback from your tutor, you can submit for summative assessment to one of three annual assessment events. For assessment you'll need to submit a cross-section of the work you've done on this course unit, as outlined in your assessment guidelines, available from:

www.oca-student.com/resource-type/assessment-guidelines

Your work will be assessed using your degree assessment criteria, available from:

www.oca-student.com/resource-type/assessment-criteria

While it's useful to know how you are being assessed from the start of your course, there's plenty of time to prepare. Further information about assessment can be found in your Student Handbook, and more detailed information in your Student Regulations. There is staged information throughout to help guide you through the assessment process. If you have any questions about assessment, make a note of them to ask your tutor later on.

Supporting your learning

Alongside providing learning materials and access to a tutor, OCA supports your learning by providing access to key texts, an online library, and other online resources.

Throughout the course unit you will be asked to undertake research into the work of other creative practitioners or to conduct your own research. Use the library and other resources available to you. You might also want to access other reliable online resources.



Research task: Accessing the library and key texts

As an OCA student, you have online access to UCA's online library resources. To find out how to log on, and what resources are available, please visit:

www.oca-student.com/resource-type/online-libraries/uca-online-library

To support your studies, OCA has provided a number of key texts related to your course unit's reading list as scanned and downloadable articles, available from:

www.oca-student.com/resource-type/scanned-library-articles

Research task: Harvard Referencing

At Level 1 you should start to develop the habit of referencing any research you undertake in your learning log using the Harvard reference system. The Harvard reference system makes it easy to locate any reference to the work of others and also prevents any accidental plagiarism. To find out how to use Harvard, please look at this resource:

<https://www.oca-student.com/resource-type/academic-referencing>



Exercise 1: What do you want / need from the course unit?

At HE Level 4, the course unit aims to introduce some of the main ideas and practices of your creative discipline, and for you to begin to explore how you can creatively and critically respond to these. Level 1 is very much about exploration, so it's a good starting point to consider what you might want or need to explore. To help you think about this, consider what you want and what you might need from the course unit? For example, whether there are areas you are keen to explore for the first time, gaps in your knowledge you would like to develop, areas you would like to expand, or study skills you would like to brush up on.

Write a short paragraph or around 5 bullet points identifying what you want and what you might need from the course unit.

To help support your learning it's also useful for your tutor to get a sense of your own creative background, your expectations of the course unit, motivations for this level of study, and any other information you'd like to share. Write a short paragraph or 5 bullet points summarising what you're bringing to the course unit.

This may be a good opportunity to consider any personal or health issues that might impact on your ability to study. Contact Learner Support to make them aware, and to access guidance and support: [learnersupport@oca.ac.uk]

Your writing diary/notebook

Your writing diary (or notebook) is an integral part of this and every other OCA creative writing course. Your writing diary is where you work reflectively, recording your thoughts on your writing and how your thought processes relate to your growing battery of skills. When you're generating creative writing texts, you may be learning on an intuitive level; the writing diary will help your understanding of how this learning process works for you. As you add to the diary, be it daily or sporadically, you'll form a record of your writing journey. This record is for you alone; you won't have to show it to anyone, so you can write from the heart about the highs and lows of becoming a writer. This can be online, as a blog, (which you can use the blog settings to keep private), or in a paper-based journal.

As well as recording your personal thoughts as you move through the course, you are also encouraged to use the writing diary to retain any new techniques or ideas you have as you work through the course contents. How many times have you read a book or taken a workshop only to rediscover a tip or technique you had forgotten? Wouldn't it be better to remember it first time round?

If you want to retain a skill or technique, a good practice is to create a 'Power of Three' list. Each time you come to a new point of learning, note it down in a sentence. Then underneath add three simple and clear ways you can put it into practice. For example, if 'the way to develop your voice as a writer is to write every day' strikes home with you, you could note it down and add:

- Schedule a regular time to write every day.
- Practise at least one exercise a day.
- Note the number of pages (or words) I complete each day on my calendar.

Not only does this help you to remember and master key topics, it also helps you to measure your progress. A little reward whenever you complete something is also worthwhile. Any day you finish a difficult scene, or write on a day you don't feel like it, or complete a writing exercise, be your own positive champion. Record in your writing diary the positive outcome and reward yourself - maybe you like chocolate or a trip to a nice café or give yourself a gold star.



Tip: summarising your learning

Whatever form of learning log you decide to use, get into the habit of going through what you've produced and summarising your key learning for your tutor. See this summary as a signpost to your learning, so you're pointing out key moments or blog posts. This will save them having to read, watch, or listen to your entire log to find out what's been important to you. It also encourages you to be more reflective and succinct in your approach.



Exercise 2: Setting up your online writing diary

Your writing diary should present your creative process, and summarise and reflect on your learning as you go.

To set up an online writing diary follow these steps and use the OCA blog template to help you get started:

<https://www.oca-student.com/resource-type/study-guide/oca-wordpress-blog-template>

If you're not using a blog, establish how you might use folders, sketchbooks, or a digital file as your writing diary.

You can find more information on the OCA student site about keeping a writing diary:

<https://www.oca-student.com/resource-type/creative-writing-student-guide>

There are many blog posts on weareoca.com about writing diaries. Do some research to see how other students have approached theirs.



Exercise 3: Analysing and reflecting

This exercise is designed to introduce the idea of analysing and reflecting on the work of others, and to give you some material for your first learning log entry or blogpost. It shouldn't take long to complete.

1. Choose a film or television programme that you particularly like. Remember to reference the works you have chosen, so it's clear what you are looking at, who wrote it, and when.
2. Try to summarise the film or TV in approximately 250 words. Consider the important things that happen in the story and who the significant characters are. Imagine you're describing the work to somebody over the telephone.

Technically, what you're doing here is analysing the formal language of storytelling and the visual medium. It will get you to think about how narrative works and what part plot and character play in the telling of the story.

3. Using the same piece, briefly write about how you relate to this work.

Do you like it or hate it, find it intriguing, influential or outdated, and if so, why? Does the work connect to wider ideas or other writers/filmmakers? In other words, what's your opinion on this work. Try to do this in no more than 50 words.

What you're doing here is being reflective by considering your own relationship to the work, as well as contextualising the writer's (or filmmaker's) work by thinking about how it might connect to wider ideas or practices in some way. Don't worry about 'getting it wrong' or 'missing the point'. Perhaps your reflection raises more questions than answers. Remember that in the arts there are no definitively right or wrong answers, just different opinions – some more authoritative than others.

4. Use the text you've generated to create your first blog post or learning log entry.

Finally, you may want to be self-reflective by considering your experience of doing the exercise. Did you find this an easy or difficult task? Did it raise any interesting issues or areas you want to develop further? Write a sentence or two picking up on any points in your learning log.

Managing your time

Your course unit requires around 400 learning hours and can be undertaken flexibly, part-time, or closer to full-time study, depending on how quickly you want to learn. You have a maximum of two years to complete these learning hours, but if you spread your learning over too long a timeframe it's easy to lose momentum. With this in mind, you might want to aim to complete this course unit within 12 months (working approximately 8 hours per week), 8 months (at 14 hours per week) or at a full time rate of around 4 months (at 28 hours per week). These timeframes will depend on how much time you can commit to study, so it's good to be realistic about what is manageable for you and your tutor.

Allow around 20% of your learning hours for reflection and keeping your learning log up to date.

During the course unit your tutor will suggest dates by which your next assignment is due based on which of these time frames you want to work within. Deadlines can be renegotiated if needed in discussion with your tutor, so long as they fit within the overall maximum time frame for the course unit.

Allocating regular time for your studies will help you balance your course work with the rest of your life. It's important to be realistic about what you can achieve. For example, don't try to undertake the course full-time, while working full-time, and juggling everything else you do. You'll end up seeing the course as 'another thing to do' which won't be useful for your motivation or creativity. It's much better to give yourself some breathing space to enjoy the challenge of your studies.



Tip: Pomodoro technique

The Pomodoro references the popular tomato-shaped food timer. Developed by Francesco Cirillo as a technique to help manage working time, the technique simply structures your focus on a task into 25 minute blocks with short breaks in-between. In other words:

1. Identify the task to be done. For example, doing a drawing or reading a text
2. Set a timer for 20-25 minutes (it doesn't have to be a Pomodoro!)
3. Work on the task
4. When the timer goes, have a short break.
5. Then set the timer and start again

After more than four cycles, take a longer break

It can help with concentration and focus, and helps to see what can be achieved in a short period of time. You can find free online Pomodoro timers here:

<http://www.online-timers.com/pomodoro-timers>



Research task: Study tips

WeAreOCA have a regular blog thread focusing on study tips and hearing from students' experiences of studying. Visit the blog and read through some of the posts:

<https://weareoca.com/category/students/study-tips/>



Tip: Additional support

Remember that if you have difficulty with any of your deadlines please get in touch with your tutor. They can discuss how quickly you want to work and set a suggested deadline during your Google Meet/phone conversation.

Additional support is available from the OCA Head Office in the form of Course Support, Student Services and Learner Support. You can email Course Support [coursesupport@oca.ac.uk] for answers to course content or subject related questions. Student Services [studentadvice@oca.ac.uk] if you have queries around study resources, time frames, finance and funding, or any general enquiries. Or contact Learner Support [learnersupport@oca.ac.uk] if any personal or health issues begin to impact on your ability to study.



Exercise 4: Managing your time

Depending on your circumstances, you might allocate time in different ways - a day a week, an hour a day, larger blocks of time such as weekends or holidays, or a combination of approaches.

Ask yourself the following questions?

- How much time you can allocate to your studies each week?
- What is my most/least productive time of the day?
- How well do I manage time?

If your course unit requires around 400 hours learning, you can break this down further by allocating 80 hours for each of the five parts of the course unit. Within each part you might want to subdivide your 80 hours by the number of topics, exercises or other tasks. Look at the contents page of this course unit to see how many there are. This should give you a rough idea of how long you need to spend on activities. Of course, it's hard to know how long things take until you've done them. Perhaps use this Getting Started section as a benchmark - how long will it take you to get through all of the exercises?

Once you have answered these questions, make a rough weekly study plan that is realistic and you can stick to. This will help you meet your deadlines you set with your tutor, share this plan when you introduce yourself to your tutor, and make a note in your learning log, so you can refer back to it later on.

Resources

In order to study you will also need some resources. These will differ depending on what you're studying. At a basic level you may need drawing and writing tools, paper, sketchbooks, and access to libraries or digital resources. Having some photography equipment is an advantage when working at a distance to help document your work. The camera on your phone will often be fine. If you have an SLR Camera even better. A tripod or 'gorilla grip' style flexible mount (for camera or phone) will be really useful. You won't need professional lighting but make sure you have a few sources of ordinary lighting, both to make sure you work in decent light levels at all times and to use for documenting your work.

Some courses require the use of specialist software, so along with a computer, you will also need to download and install these applications. Where possible we have highlighted 'freeware' options, that are available free of charge, as well as industry standard software you may want to purchase.

Here's a general list of what you may need for this specific course unit:

- **Film and Screenplays:** this course guide references over 60 films and we certainly don't expect you to have watched them all! A full list of references and sources can be found at the end of this coursebook. The best plan is to skim through the course guide quickly to see which films are referenced and then see how many you already own or can borrow from friends or family. The key thing is to watch as many films as you can – they don't have to be mentioned in the course guide. Keep a record and brief notes on every film you watch in your writing diary so that you can mention them in your reflective commentaries.
- To watch films and television examples, you may need a DVD/blu-ray player or an online streaming account (such as Netflix or Amazon Prime Video). We have tried to reference films which are readily available to watch in physical or streaming format.
- Part One of the course lists some options for software that will make the writing of screenplays easier.

Here is a list of digital resources and software you will need:

- A personal computer you have reliable and regular access to, and is equipped with up to date software and has this operating system installed.
- Google Drive, which is a free service provided by Google. It is an online file sharing system based on the cloud, so you can access it from anywhere. You will be expected to upload files from your computer and share them with your tutor, and submit documents for assessment using Google Drive.
- Google mail: this service hosts all OCA email address as a free service through Gmail. Personal email addresses should not be used for OCA studies.
- Online learning logs are required for the update of supporting studies by the OCA as a distance learning institution. The OCA recommend Wordpress, but any online blogging platform may be used.

Think about any other materials, tools, or other resources you might need, as well as items from the above specialist subject-related equipment that would be useful.

Try not to feel limited by the spaces or resources you have available at the moment, creativity can flourish anywhere and there's plenty of time to acquire the equipment you need! Working at a distance, can have advantages to working in University studios and classrooms, as you develop your own spaces and resources that suit you.



Tip: Student discounts on software

All students enrolled with OCA are encouraged to register for an NUS card. The card entitles you to discounts on thousands of products including software and apps, as well as buying materials in local art shops.

Your working space

Finding a space to study is equally important. You will need a space to make your work, be it the kitchen table, a spare room or an existing studio space, somewhere to work on your learning log or work digitally, access to a computer, and space to read and reflect which could be much more flexible and also slot into other times, for example reading on the train on the way to work.



Exercise 5: Setting up your space

Prepare a list of the equipment and other resources you might need. What do you currently have and what might you need? Don't worry if you don't have everything now, there's plenty of time to build your resources as you progress through the course unit and degree. If you're not sure of what you need, then prepare a list of questions to ask your tutor.

Now, choose a space, or spaces, where you will do most of your study, and prepare it so it's an environment you will enjoy working in and you are able to store your equipment and resources.

You may want to take a photo of your studio space to share with your tutor via your learning log.



Research task: OCASA

OCA's Student Association (OCASA) [www.ocasa.org.uk] is also available to you as a student. One of their activities is organising joint study visits with OCA tutors. Visit <https://weareoca.com/category/study-visits/> to see any study visits you would like to attend, either virtually or in person.



Exercise 6: Say hello to your fellow students

It's worth remembering that while you're in your space working, there are lots of other OCA students doing the same thing. Your fellow students can provide fresh perspectives, feedback and encouragement. Get in touch with other students to say hello, and to share something about you or your practice. For example, by sharing your online learning log URL, your work on Exercise 3, or your photo of your studio space. You can make contact with them through our OCA discuss site: [<https://discuss.oca-student.com/>]. You'll find a welcome section here:

<https://discuss.oca-student.com/c/welcome-introduce-yourself-here>

You can also talk to fellow students through your email group, which you were added to when you enrolled. This email group is specific to your course unit. Its purpose is to make it easier for students studying the same course unit at the same time to talk to one another, upload images and critique one another's work. Through these groups you have access to the experience of students who are further along in their studies who can offer advice and guidance and you can take comfort in knowing there are others at the same point as, you starting off, who may share the same worries or concerns. These course discussion groups utilise 'Google groups' to operate. Click here: <https://www.oca-student.com/content/course-discussions-feature-launched> for more information.

Remember to communicate respectfully and responsibly with other students and OCA staff online. If you would like further information listen to this short piece on Netiquette:

<https://www.oca-student.com/resource-type/online-guide-elements/getting-grips-netiquette>



Exercise 7: Say hello to your tutor

For your final exercise, get in touch with your tutor to arrange a 15-20 min conversation using Google Meet [<https://meet.google.com/>] or over the phone. Alternatively, you can email your tutor to arrange an alternative means to communicate.

This is an opportunity to say hello to your tutor and put a voice to a name. It's also a chance to discuss how best to schedule your time, document your work, and share it. The previous exercises and research tasks will have helped you prepare for this conversation and identified any questions you'd like to ask. Use your notes from these exercises as a starting point.

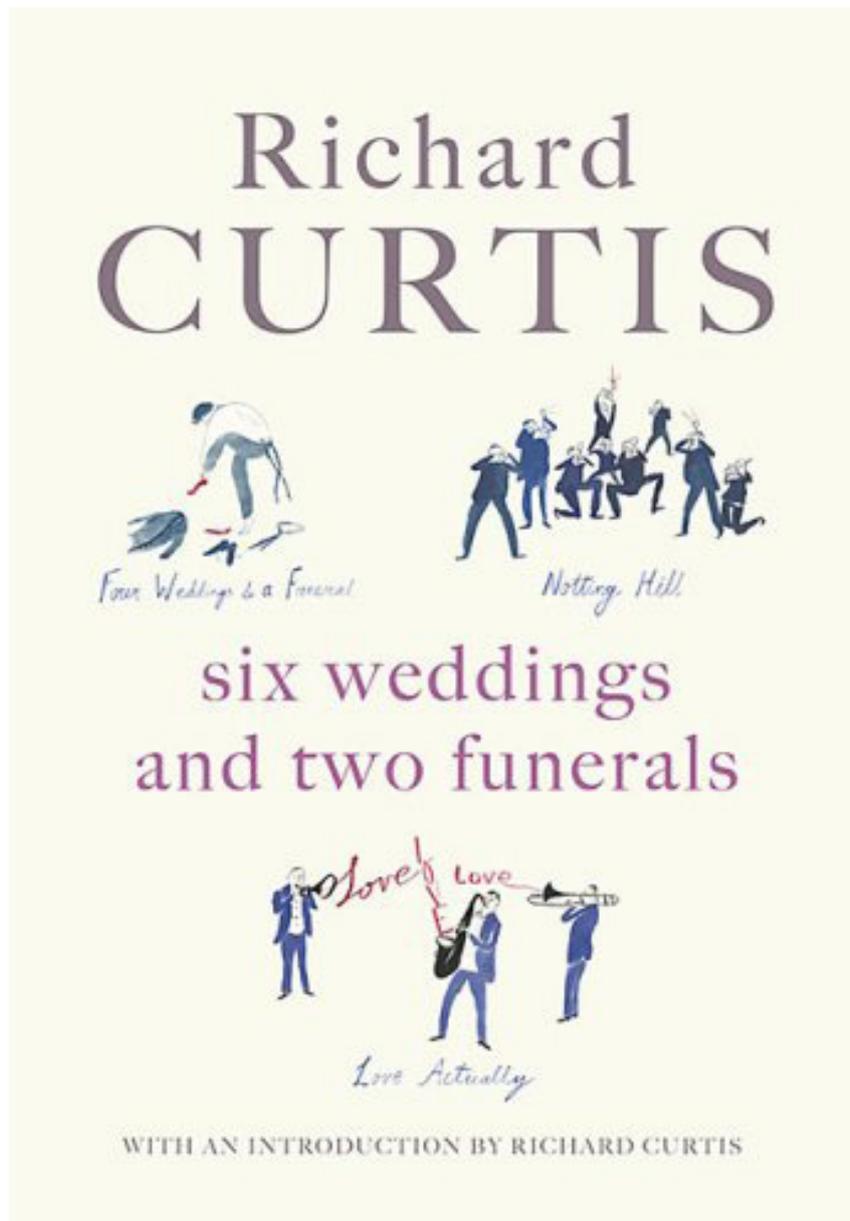
You may want to reflect on this conversation in your learning log as a way to identify any key points and as a starting point to refer back to later on.

Finally, you may want to reflect on doing this introduction as a whole. Has it been useful and are there things we could do differently? Feel free to get in touch with OCA directly or use the forums to help us improve our support if you have any ideas.

Starting your course unit

You should now be ready to start Part One of your course unit. Don't worry if you are still getting to grips with using your blog, adjusting to this form of learning, or don't have all the resources you need. There's plenty of time to develop these as you progress. Don't forget, that if you get stuck along the way the plenty of support available from OCA and encouragement from your fellow students.

Enjoy the rest of your studies!



Six Weddings and Two Funerals: Three Screenplays by Richard Curtis (Michael Joseph, 2006). Cover reproduced with permission from Penguin Books.

Scriptwriting 1

Part One: Writing Stories for Screen



Still from the film *Shanghai Express*, Marlene Dietrich and Clive Brook, 1932

Part One of this course is where you will learn what a screenplay is and what a screen story is. These are the two vital components to writing a good film or television script. We must create a story with interesting events, engaging characters and a structured shape; and we must deliver it in the screenplay form.

In this part, we will master the required unique layout of screenplays and begin the process of developing a story of your own that you can continue to work on throughout the rest of the course.

Project 1: What is a screenplay?



"You need three things to make a good movie: a good script, a good script and a good script."

Alfred Hitchcock, film director

Unlike prose (which is generally just solid text telling the story), screenplay writers need to think of their writing in a different way. Prose writers communicate directly with their audience – the story is there on the page and it comes alive in the mind of the reader. Film and television are different. Scripts are not written for cinema or TV viewers. Viewers want to watch a film, not read text. Scripts, then, are written to be read by 'the script reader' whose job it is to consume the story and be inspired to turn it into something on the cinema or television screen (often investing their own time and money).

So, beyond the words of a script, there is a whole other process of production before our story gets in front of the eyes of the viewer. For this reason, many people call the script 'the blueprint for a film'. It is a technical document that will pass through many hands: from the script reader or producer who first reads it, to the team of executives who will fund it, to the director who will make it, to the cinematographer who will film it, to the sound engineer, to the set and costume designer, and to the actors who will inhabit the characters (to name but a few). The script is their guide and template for making the film. It is therefore essential that the script is clear, concise and correctly formatted.

Producers and directors receive hundreds of scripts, so you'll want yours to stand out from the crowd and make a good impression. If your script is incorrectly formatted, the script reader or producer will immediately think you're unprofessional and reject your screenplay (probably without even reading it). Many compelling stories have likely ended up on the scrapheap because the screenwriter did not get over the first basic hurdle in the screen industry: it must look like a script.

Script format and layout goes further than simple industry convention, however. Another reason that scripts are presented the way they are is to do with timing. The general rule in screenwriting is that the length of the script should roughly equal the length of the finished film – so one page of script equals one minute of screen time. A typical feature-length film will be in the region of 100 to 120 pages long. A standard hour of television (60 minutes) will be approximately 60 pages long. In fact, your final assignment in this course will be to write the first 15 minutes of a feature-length screen story (or a complete 15-minute short film) which equates to approximately 15 pages (see the end of Part Five for further details).

If we continue with the metaphor of the script being the blueprint for a film, then, one thing becomes immediately clear: you should write only what a viewer will be able to see and hear when they finally watch the story on screen. Everything else is superfluous.

A script should have the following attributes:

- *Description*. Sometimes also called visual directions or action, this will include essential information about the location, characters, what is happening, and, most importantly, what the characters are doing at every point of the story.
- *Dialogue*. When characters speak in your story, you have to script their words.
- *Scenes*. A screenplay is broken into scenes which show the action taking place at a specific time and in a specific location. Every time one of those elements changes – time or location – it becomes a new scene. Scenes can vary greatly in length, from a couple of lines to two or three pages, and this can influence the pace of your script.
- *Page numbers*.
- *Set margins*.
- *Set font type and size*. Screenplays are always written in Courier 12 pt.

The font needing to be Courier 12 pt relates to the timing formula that is applied to scripts. When they invented the screenplay form over 100 years ago, writers only had manual typewriters to write with. The 'one page equals one minute' rule only works if we make our screenplays look like they come out of a typewriter. It may be tempting to use some beautiful italic serif font on your computer, but if you do, the sizing and time calculation will be all out.

That said, the timing formula is an average one. Dialogue tends to run faster (two pages per minute or so) while action can be much, much slower. In the film *The Deer Hunter (1978)*, for instance, there is a party described in the script in a couple of lines, but the scene runs for over four minutes in the film. Action or fight scenes (or, for that matter, love scenes) also take up less space in description than they end up as on screen. However, in most scripts, if the balance of dialogue and action is about right, then they tend to average out at a page a minute.



Research point

To get a feel for what screenplays look like and how they are written, go online and search for a favourite film of yours to see if the screenplay is available. A good practice is to watch a film with the screenplay to hand, so you can see how various parts of the story were written in word form.

The following websites allow you to download film and TV scripts for free:

- Script-o-rama: <http://www.script-o-rama.com/>
- Internet Movie Script Database (IMSDb): <https://www.imsdb.com/>
- Simply Scripts: <https://www.simplyscripts.com/>
- Daily Script: <https://www.dailyscript.com/>
- BBC Writersroom Script Library: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom/scripts>

When you access scripts online, you may notice variations in formatting (e.g. between the US and the UK, and between television and film scripts). Don't worry about this. For the purposes of this course, follow the guidelines laid down here.

However you will notice that often the scripts you read online will be what is called a 'shooting script'. This is the version of the script used during the actual production of the film. It has the director's input – most significantly with lots of camera directions (such as 'close-up', 'pan', 'zoom', etc). This is unfortunately the only version of a script that is available in many cases. However, if you can get hold of a 'writer's draft', that is the best thing. It shows exactly what your scripts should be like. You are a scriptwriter, not a director, so steer clear of defining what the camera should be doing.



Exercise 1.1

Read the following script formatting guide which details everything you need to know about layout and format.

Note how each element should appear in the screenplay:

- Scene headings
- Description
- Speaker names
- Dialogue
- Parentheticals
- Transitions

INT/EXT. LOCATION - DAY/NIGHT

Scene headers should indicate whether the scene takes place in an interior (INT) or exterior (EXT) location. Indicate if it is DAY or NIGHT.

Use Courier 12 point. Not Times. Not Garamond. No fancy flowery typefaces, just plain Courier. No bold lettering. No italics. If you need to emphasise something, underline it or put it FULL CAPS.

Directions should be typed full width like this.

The first time a CHARACTER appears in the script, their name should be typed in full caps. Thereafter, put in normal upper and lower case.

For dialogue, name of speaker should be typed full caps and indented 2¼ inches. Dialogue should be indented 1½ inches on either side. Like so:

SPEAKER

These are the words I am saying.

The script should be single-spaced but with an extra line separating dialogue from text, and one character's speech from another's. Like so:

SPEAKER (CONT'D)

There's a space above this speech,
separating it from the text.

LISTENER

And another space to separate this
speech from the one before it.

If a character speaks whilst off-screen, you will need to indicate this too, thus:

SPEAKER2 (O.S.)

O.S. indicates that I am in the scene
but off-screen while I am talking.

SPEAKER (V.O.)

This indicates that I am speaking
a voiceover or narration.

A general rule of thumb is to limit a paragraph of description to four or five lines. Consider each paragraph as a significant moment of action within your scene.

Don't try to tell the actors how to say their lines. Only use parenthetical speech direction where it is absolutely necessary, such as:

SPEAKER
(to Listener)
I am speaking to you, not the other
character in this scene.

Or:

SPEAKER2
(ironically)
If I don't say this line ironically,
the audience might take the wrong
meaning.

Remember that dialogue has to be spoken by actors and must sound like human speech.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. LOCATION #2 - NIGHT

Between this scene and the previous scene there is a transition. It is formatted right-aligned.

On-screen text, such as letters, e-mails, or signs, are formatted in a couple of ways. Brief text, such as a sign, can go in the body of the scene action: "THIS IS A SIGN".

"Something longer, like a letter, is formatted like reported dialogue enclosed within double-quote marks. It can be in normal upper and lower-case text, OR ALL IN CAPITALS depending on the text it is representing."

FADE OUT only ever appears at the end of a feature-length screenplay, or an act in a television script.

If you want to indicate a FADE OUT and a FADE IN within the body of the script, then the correct transitional term is FADE TO: as above. However, as mentioned earlier, scene transitions should be avoided in spec scripts unless they have some narrative meaning.

FADE OUT.

Software

All this formatting might seem like a lot to remember, but the more scripts you write, the easier it will become, and you will get used to the requirements.

Now the good news: there are a number of software options available which will take care of the formatting for you, freeing you up to concentrate on writing a creative story. Many of these software options are free or cost very little. Some makers of software even offer educational discounts on packages that cost money – as a student with OCA, you should be able to take advantage of a student discount (usually you simply need to prove your student status with an email address or form of ID).

Here are the current best software options for screenplay formatting:

- Fade In (<http://www.fadeinpro.com>) (highly recommended) works on all computer and mobile platforms (Windows, Apple, Linux, Android and iPad/iPhone). It replicates all the functions of the really expensive software used by professional screenwriters, but it is very easy to use. You can save your work both to your computer and to a cloud space (such as Dropbox), which not only gives you back-up but means you can take your work anywhere and always access the latest version. You can download a free trial version which will let you do everything you need in the course. You can also buy an upgrade to the full Pro version which normally costs about \$75 (check current rates of exchange) but as an OCA student you can take advantage of a 30% student discount.
- Celtx (<https://www.celtx.com>) works across platforms (Windows, Apple and Linux) but has some quirks of use that need getting used to, making it not the easiest software. It has a free version and an unlocked version for approximately £15.
- Trelby (<https://www.trelby.org>) is completely free, but only works on Windows and Linux operating systems.
- Scrivener (<http://www.literatureandlatte.com/scrivener.php>) works on Windows and Mac. More than just a script formatting software, it also helps you to organise research and plot your story. It works for both prose writers and screenwriters which makes it a popular tool among writers of all kinds. Costs between £30 and £40, but does offer student discounts.
- Microsoft Word does have a free screenplay template built in, which means you do not need an extra piece of software such as those listed above. Simply create a new Word file and search for 'screenplay' in the online templates. It is not nearly as comprehensive as the dedicated software options listed above, but it will do the basics.



Research point

Investigate the various script-formatting options listed here and see which one works best for you. Much will depend on which computer and operating system you have, and possibly how computer literate you are. They are all similar and the learning curve is small.

Once you know where the settings are to make dialogue look like dialogue, and scene headings look like scene headings, and so on, they are very easy to use. You will quickly find that it takes the worry out of the process and enable you to write fascinating scripts!

Is scriptwriting all technical, then?

The answer to that question is a resounding 'no'. While it is important that the screenplay is technically presented in the right way, you should never forget that this is still creative writing and we are still telling a story. The screenwriter should try to convey the emotion, energy, tone and texture of the story through the writing. If you are writing a horror film, you want to write it in a way that makes the hairs stand up on the back of the reader's neck. If you are writing a tragic love story, the reader should be driven to tears and choked up by your scriptwriting. Unless the reader feels the power of your story, they will not recommend it for production.

Don't panic! We have lots more projects and exercises for you to try so you can master the craft of writing a great screenplay. We will look at various elements in detail, such as visual description and dialogue.



Exercise 1.2

Choose a film – perhaps one of your favourites or something you have seen recently or something from your DVD collection. Check online to see if the screenplay is available, but don't read it yet.

First watch the film and choose a scene you particularly like.

Then write a version of the scene with description and dialogue (if appropriate). Use the correct script format.

Now download the screenplay from one of the online databases and compare what you have written with what was actually in the script.

- What has the writer added or omitted in comparison to your version?
- How much detail does the writer use in comparison to your version?
- Which language and grammar does the writer use to express the emotions or drama of the scene?

Make some notes on how well you did with this exercise in your writer's notebook. If you found it hard, try repeating the exercise for a different scene. You might also try this on two different kinds of films (e.g. a drama and a comedy, or a romantic comedy and a horror film). Note how different kinds of stories are written differently.

Project 2: In the beginning ...

Story is nothing new and certainly not unique to cinema and television. It is one of the things that sets human beings apart from other animals. We have an imagination and creativity which enables us to order ideas so that they make sense to other people. It all goes back to a dark cave where a caveman told his tribe about his adventures trying to collect the good food for everyone to eat. He told how the best food was found in the trees over the hill, but an ambush of tigers lurked nearby and he barely escaped with his life. It is easy to imagine the men, women and children of the tribe being captivated as the caveman recounted his exciting quest to find food. They may have not spoken English and they may have painted on walls or scratched in the earth, but that careful ordering of information to communicate events is what storytelling is all about.

The good news we can take from this is that story is hard-wired into us as human beings. We all use it every day when we communicate; so the leap to writing narrative stories is not huge. What does have to be learned, however, is the craft required to shape a story for the screen. The dark cave is now a cinema (or our dimly lit front room) and the tribe pay to see an adventure about a group of people trapped or facing hardship. Underneath it all is still story.

Story is the single most important thing in the screenplays you will write. When a script makes it into production, dialogue is the first thing that gets changed. Actors often come along and 'make the dialogue their own' to suit the way they are performing. Entire scenes can be dropped, either while shooting or in the editing process. Locations can change from one city to another; from one country to another. The film *Looper* (2012) had scenes that took place in France, but they were changed to China because it was cheaper to film there. Characters are removed or changed to accommodate the cast. *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) is based on a Stephen King novella that features a succession of three different prison governors. In the film, they merge them all into one character who stays for the whole story. In the same film, the character of Red (so called because he was an Irishman with ginger hair in the book) became an elderly black man when they cast Morgan Freeman. Everything is changeable in film production, but the basic story remains the same.

Many new screenwriters rush into writing the script before they fully understand their story. The excitement of the idea or the characters takes hold and they simply want to write. Then halfway through the script that excitement is gone and they are left with a collection of scenes which may not add up to a story at all. Or it might be a story so disorganised and dull that no one would want to see it. In the screen industry, these kinds of scripts are said to have 'story problems'.

To give yourself the best experience of scriptwriting, story problems need to be solved before you end up with tens or hundreds of unusable pages.

The best first approach to coming up with a story for a script is to keep it clear and simple.

Concept



When I started writing full-time all I had to talk to was my word processor. I had to learn how to bounce ideas off myself.

Andrew Davies, writer and adaptor – *Pride and Prejudice, Bridget Jones's Diary, House of Cards, Mr Selfridge* (Frensham, 2008, p.33)

People always say they 'have a great idea for a story'. Immediately you can see from that phrase that an idea isn't a story; it is just one of the elements. A story begins with an idea, but it takes a whole bunch of ideas to make a story. Each idea builds on the other ideas to create a concept.

Here's an example. There is a lawyer called Fletcher and he is terrific at bending the truth. That's why he is successful in the courtroom. He's also a divorced father. He's lied to his son so many times that the child no longer believes anything his dad says. The ex-wife is dating this perfect man named Jerry who gets along really well with the boy. This makes Fletcher jealous and he promises his son things he can't deliver. Fletcher wants to win the role of partner at his law firm, so he sleeps with his attractive female boss and thus misses his son's birthday party. Disappointed, the son makes a birthday wish that his lawyer dad cannot tell a lie for 24 hours. But Fletcher has a huge make-or-break case and the only way to win is to lie! Then his ex-wife decides to marry Jerry and move to Boston to create a more stable life, taking the child with them. Because Fletcher now cannot lie, he's going to lose his case, his job and his son.

Recognise the film? All of those little ideas (and many more) make up the concept to the film *Liar Liar* (1997), written by Paul Guay and Stephen Mazur.

This is how you build up a strong story – by linking up lots of ideas. Your first job, then, in becoming a developing screenwriter, is to become an ideas machine.



Research point

Either in your writer's notebook or in a separate notebook called 'Ideas', make a point of writing at least one idea every day. Look around in magazines and publications; watch or read the news; be aware as things happen around you. Note down anything that sounds interesting. The idea can be big or small, rough or developed. You are simply trying to get into the habit of generating story material. Sometimes it helps to label ideas in different sections: one for plot, one for characters, one for dialogue, and one for action or visuals.

Whatever it is, and however you do it, write ideas down! Firstly, it will stop you forgetting things; and secondly, this makes it easier to find things when you need them as you write.

Where to find story ideas

The first sparks for a story can be found anywhere. It is good practice as you develop your skills as a screenwriter to tune up your creative antennae. Carry a notebook with you at all times and note down any ideas or snippets of dialogue, locations visited or stories heard, so you can flesh them out later.

Below are some concepts to help you develop potential story ideas.

- *News*. This is sometimes the best place to research ideas – and better still, if you use libraries and the internet, it's free! You can find all kinds of ideas in the news: drama and romance ideas, relationship dynamics, comedy moments, issue-related ideas. Don't stop with newspapers: look through magazines too and also watch the news on TV. Why? Because they are visual.
- *What if?* This is the basic question in all idea creation. Take an idea and twist it. What if Alzheimer's research created a test patient who was more intelligent than the scientists who 'created' him? What if your dreams started coming true ... as well as your nightmares? This is a great tool for all storytelling. Start thinking 'What if?' about everything.
- *Central conflict*. Conflict is the lifeblood of all good storytelling. Identify a problem, then try to generate different ways that it might affect different characters and different situations. We will take a closer look at conflict later in the course.
- *Science*. This is a great place to find ideas. Sometimes a scientific discovery is amazing enough to be the starting point for a story. Other times you can combine a science fact with a 'What if?'. Often combining several small science facts can create a single great idea.
- *Issues*. Some of the best screenplays discuss some social, moral or political issues in the safety of a fictional narrative. Issues are full of conflict and are fertile ground for finding ideas brimming with drama.
- *History*. History is full of heroes, villains, battles and strange events. The past is often filled with great ideas that can be used in a couple of different ways – as historical fact or as a jumping-off point. *The King's Speech* (2010), *Elizabeth* (1998) and *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and *Titanic* (1997) all came from historical fact.
- *Fears*. A great place to find ideas for a film story is to start with what scares people. Fear is conflict and conflict is story. For instance, a fairly common fear from childhood is fear of the dark. This shows up in any number of thriller and horror films such as *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Pitch Black* (2000) and *Don't Breathe* (2016). Find a fear that interests you and start jotting down ideas that will force characters to confront that fear. Don't stop with physical fears; think about emotional fears too, such as fear of commitment.
- *Arena*. An 'arena' is the world in which the story takes place, rather than just the location. Think how many films have been set in high school or the sports world. *Top Gun* (1986) and *Moneyball* (2011), for example, take place in very particular worlds. Television series love to capitalise on this narrative element – TV audiences never seem to tire of seeing stories set in the world of doctors, hospitals, the police force, emergency services, and so on. Once you have an arena, of course you need to think of an interesting thing to happen in that place. The arena is just part of the idea.

- *Character.* Characters are the key to all good drama. Things and places cannot be dramatic; they only *become* dramatic when there is a human element involved. A great way to develop a story from character is to ask: 'What is the worst thing that could happen to this person?'



Exercise 1.3

Explore some of the areas listed above as prompts or sources to generate ideas. In each area, the key things you are looking for are: interesting characters, interesting situations, potential for drama and potential for emotion. Make notes in your writer's notebook so that you can come back and further develop some of these later.

What you are doing here is training your brain to look beyond the broad strokes to the specifics. You are also trying to get to what interests you in the material. This is important because you are going to write it as a story and need to find your own angle on it. What you experience, believe, feel and think in life can be a rich source and will be part of your storytelling. Let it guide you in finding something to write about, and let it make your storytelling meaningful to others. Why? Because the biggest goal of any screenwriter should be to connect with your viewing audience on an emotional level. To connect with others, we have to connect with ourselves. The key to your success as a screenwriter will be understanding how to interpret and express your personal experiences in a universal way, and in a fictional, dramatised setting.

You, the storyteller

We have looked at some specific sources of inspiration in this project, but by far the biggest one you will need to draw on in all aspects of your scriptwriting will be yourself and your own interests. So here are some other things to think about when trying to develop story ideas.

- *Write what you know.* This is probably the most well-used adage when people are giving advice to new writers. But don't make the mistake of misinterpreting what it actually means. If you have spent your whole life up to now working in a tax office, it does not mean you can only write a story about a tax inspector. 'Write what you know' doesn't always mean fact. Instead, it is about using your personal experience to create emotional truth at the core of your story. If you know what it's like to experience a particular kind of loss, or love, then bring this knowledge to your writing. Think about the experiences that have come to define you as a person: think about what you learned from them. Write what you know with your heart, not what you know with your head or your eyes.
- *Write what you don't know.* Place your own emotional story in a new setting and let it develop. Let your characters pull you into fiction. Open your mind to every possibility: follow ideas or images that appeal to you, even if they don't make sense yet. Often the subconscious mind knows what it's doing long before the logic becomes apparent to the conscious brain. Learn to trust this. The 'golden rule' of screenwriting is to first write with your heart, then write and re-write with your head.

- *Write what you want to know.* Set your story in a world in which you want to spend time. Give yourself an area of research that you will enjoy. In your writing, you can be a lobster fisherman, a politician, a model, or an activist; you can live in a beach hut, a penthouse, or a caravan; you can be an expert on tides, power play, the fashion world, police procedures – anything at all. Follow your fancy and put yourself into the fiction.



Exercise 1.4

In your writer's notebook, brainstorm one idea in each of the following categories.

1. *Personal experience.* ('Write what you know'): remember it is about life and emotional experience as much as factual events. What life experiences can you authentically draw on?
2. *Fictionalise it.* Take something from your own life or an issue that matters to you and place in either a new arena, a new period of history or in a new character.
3. *Imagination.* Using simple free writing (writing without interruption or editing) for 15 minutes straight using one of these prompts:
 - A story set in a caravan park
 - A story about a surfer
 - A story set in the times of the Aztecs

What's the big idea?

Let's now return to the phrase: 'I've got a great idea for a story'. As we have seen, one idea does not a screenplay make. You will need to combine ideas in order to create a story. By the time you write your screenplay, all your little ideas will have blended together to make one big idea called a concept (which is the idea behind the whole film). A great concept is the first most important element in creating a great film story. The story that results from that concept will be filled with a developing chain of ideas.

In the film *Die Hard With A Vengeance* (1995) there is a terrorist, Gruber, ostensibly trying to blow up New York. But that is just the beginning. The real plot is to rob the Federal Reserve Bank of all its gold. On top of that, there is the Gruber/McClane revenge plot; plus the reluctant Harlem store owner who gets embroiled in solving the puzzle; plus the ticking clocks on the bombs; plus the 'Simon says' game; plus the tunnel escape. And so on.

Even with all these neat little ideas, remember the focus of the script is the 'concept'. You do not want to confuse your audience with a bunch of unconnected ideas. You must make sure your dozen small ideas are somehow related to the story concept. All the small ideas should share the same DNA as the concept: the central conflict that fuels the story.

Die Hard With A Vengeance is a good example of small ideas revolving around the core concept of 'everyman policeman must save New York when it comes under attack from a mad terrorist'. The bomber is using the explosions to cover up his robbery of the Federal Bank. He calls the police and plays 'Simon says' to give them clues as to where each of the bombs are. Once on site, deactivating the bombs requires solving a puzzle. The policeman being called is the man who killed the bomber's brother. Each small idea supports the concept and is part of the big idea. Instead of distracting from the core concept, each small idea focuses on it and heightens it.



Exercise 1.5

Take any film or TV programme you have seen and try to work out what the overall story is (the big idea; the concept). Now list all the little parts of the film that make up that story. Make notes in your writer's notebook of places where these story strands cross over.

Project 3: What makes a good screen story?

Films and television are about storytelling above all else. Without a story, the snappiest dialogue or most amazing performances from actors mean nothing. Story is the foundation for all good films. What is unique about film (and that includes television) is that they are stories told on screen.

So, a good film is a story told in pictures.

As we have seen in Project 2, good stories all begin with a good idea. So how do we get from idea to story? To do this we need to understand what are the elements that make up a workable dramatic story. We are calling it 'dramatic story' because, uniquely, we are writing screenplay and that means the storytelling is done through active moments of action and dialogue on screen. In this regard, we are in similar territory to theatre and radio, but our unique canvas is the screen. This is the key difference from other major forms of writing: novel stories are told in words; screenplay stories are told in visual images, action and dialogue.

To help us understand how good dramatic story works, we are going to travel back in time to 350 BC and study the works of Aristotle.

Aristotle is one of the greatest intellectual figures of Western history. Born in 384 BC in Greece, he was the author of a philosophical and scientific system that became the framework for both Christian scholasticism and medieval Islamic philosophy. Even after the intellectual revolutions of the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment, Aristotelian concepts remained embedded in Western thinking. Aristotle's intellectual range was vast, covering most of the sciences and many of the arts, including biology, botany, chemistry, ethics, history, logic, metaphysics, rhetoric, philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, physics, political theory, psychology and zoology.

One of Aristotle's major works was called *Poetics*, where he laid down the principles of dramatic storytelling. It is important to note that Aristotle was an intellectual and scientist. He was not himself a dramatist. So, he did not 'invent' dramatic storytelling. Instead he conducted a years-long research project that involved him travelling around to experience as many forms of 'live' storytelling as he could. Sometimes it was organised theatre shows to large audiences; other times it was just a storyteller on a street corner holding the attention of a crowd as he told some tale of derring-do, travel, adventure or romance. By doing this, Aristotle wanted to understand how dramatic storytelling in front of an audience worked. And that is what he wrote in his *Poetics*.



Research point

In the library or online, research Aristotle and *Poetics*. See if you can find the meaning of the following Greek-derived words:

- *mythos*
- *ethos*
- *hamartia*
- *lexis*
- *opsis*
- *mimesis*
- *catharsis*
- *peripeteia*
- *anagnorisis*
- *dianoia*

At the end of his travels and study, Aristotle analysed everything he had seen and heard and documented the things that seemed to be common in all the stories he witnessed, regardless of their form, arena or audience. In other words, he scientifically distilled dramatic storytelling down to its common components.

What he found was quite surprising. Stories told by high intellectual dramatists in amphitheatres with a cast of actors worked in exactly the same way as stories told by a beggar man regaling passers-by with a fable in return for coins. In fact, he deduced that dramatic storytelling sits at the heart of all human communication. If we want to say or inform someone about an event, or a fact or an idea, our human brains structure the message into a coherent entity that we call 'story'. And the way we keep the listener's attention in the 'story' is to give them ordered information with surprises and reveals.

What is even more surprising for us looking at the *Poetics* today is that, even though film would not be invented for centuries after Aristotle, he still found all the elements that we use in our stories told on screen today (although we add in some focused elements of the visual screen medium).

Aristotle's key points of dramatic storytelling

What did Aristotle discover were the keys to good dramatic storytelling that can help us to develop a screenplay?

1. Aristotle asserts that all stories have a narrative structure (a beginning, a middle and an end). This means we have to carefully order our stories so they have a natural progression with high points and low points that lead to a complete, cohesive narrative.
2. He also states that stories should imitate life – they should show recognisable aspects of human existence that the audience can relate to. However, he also says that stories are not *exact* copies of reality, but rather *representations* of reality. So when the audience sees a film or TV programme, they get a version of life that they recognise, but in a palatable form.
3. Aristotle says that all stories need characters to bring them to life, and that characters have an arc: they ascend or descend on a scale of 'goodness' or 'badness'. Metamorphosis (or change), then, is essential to a good dramatic story.
4. Aristotle talks about the importance of 'purgation' or *catharsis*. This is a major moment when various psychological dynamics come to a head, leading to a sort of 'purification' of an individual's psyche, the release of some long-held personal problem, or at least a purer self-understanding. The writer is key in delivering this: 'imitation of life' requires distance so the writer can observe it; 'showing catharsis' requires identification from the writer so you can authentically present it back to the audience. In other words, you the writer need to be able to observe life, human experience, the world, and understand (or at least think about) what it feels like, so you can put it into your story and show it to the audience in a way that they will find believable.
5. Aristotle stresses the importance of linking 'personal agents' (characters) to actions – so the internal world of people is as important as the external world of things happening. We cannot create a story without grounding it in characters, and we cannot understand our characters unless we immerse ourselves in the world of their thoughts. 'Thought' in this context is not a mental activity, but an articulation of moral purpose and character, a reflection of the story's core ideas and issues. And it is this element of the inner world of characters that will give your story meaning. For example, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) is, on the surface, about a little boy trying to help a stranded alien to get back home. Underneath this, however, is a powerfully emotive story of a lonely boy who finds a friend, only to discover that when you love someone you have to do what's best for them, not what's best for you. Which is why audiences always cry at the end of *E.T.* when Elliot has to say goodbye to his only friend.
6. Aristotle says that a story doesn't just need order (beginning, middle and end) but also a logical believability. He talks about the balance between Surprise and Cause-and-Effect. Surprise is some sort of reversal or twist which the audience does not expect. Cause-and-Effect is any new story event which, upon reflection by the audience, will seem in retrospect to be inevitable within the context of the dynamics you have set into motion in the narrative. Cause-and-Effect also gives your story a seamless sense of forward movement.

7. Aristotle also discusses the importance of 'reversals'. These are points in the story when a character meets an obstacle that knocks them off course and challenges their desire or intention. A good way of thinking about these in your story is to think of them as problems or obstacles. A strong story is made up of a series of these problems that a character must deal with before getting to the end.

The telling of a story depends on an individual writer's personal creativity (this is what makes each story unique and original). Yes, there are patterns and structures and conventional wisdom, but they should not restrict you. Express your own creativity, and your own voice within your narrative.

Overall, what Aristotle identified in his study of dramatic story was that they all have, at their heart, a principle of 'change through adversity'. The story is a series of dramatic problems and situations that have an effect on the central character and their world. When the audience sees this, they empathise with the characters and, thus, connect with your story on an intellectual and an emotional level.

When trying to develop the kernel of a film story idea, you should look particularly at the combination of story event and character. You are looking for the right mix of both to create a story that has lots of potential, twists and turns, surprises and something for the audience to root for. This kind of storytelling ('what will happen next?', 'how will they get out of that one?', 'don't go in there!') generates the key requirement for any story told to an audience: emotion.

The Poetics and screenwriting

Much more than in Aristotle's time, audience is a huge component in modern screenwriting because everything about making films and television involves money. The key to a great film or television script idea, then, is that it should be both personal to you and potentially commercial. That means it should contain both a strong physical conflict (things happening, people falling in love, people clashing, moments of excitement, etc.) and an emotional conflict (that the audience can relate to). The difference between a rubbish film and a good one is 'heart'. And 'heart' is an emotional conflict the audience can relate to.

The place to find that is in the central character of your story idea. Construct your idea so that the central character has to face up to personal problems as well as external plot problems – perhaps something in their past that they don't want to relive; perhaps some deep fear; or maybe some mistake they made and never gotten over.

At the start of the Alfred Hitchcock film *Vertigo* (1958), Scottie Ferguson's fear of heights causes the death of his policeman partner. The fear of heights is tied to his partner's death and the character's subsequent guilt. From that fear grows the plot, because the plot will force Scottie to face his fear.

In *Bridesmaids* (2011), Annie Walker feels like a failure because her bakery business went bust, so she sets out to prove herself as the best maid of honour when her friend is getting married. From that emotional problem grows the plot, as she keeps trying to impress her friend and it keeps backfiring.

In his book *Breaking Through, Selling Out, Dropping Dead*, William Bayer explains why some films are hits and others flop: 'A film becomes a hit when the fantasy it represents coincides with the needs of the audience' (Bayer, 2004). So, a successful screen story explores a subconscious fear or desire currently held by the audience. It's a zeitgeist thing.

This explains why a seemingly mindless action film like *Taken* (2008) turned out to be such a smash hit with audiences. When the world economy crashed in the early 2000s, lives were ruined. Add to that the tensions in places like the Middle East and seemingly endless wars around the world, many people felt weak and powerless. *Taken* is a fantasy about the importance of family. The central character is underestimated by the bad guys, which taps into the audience's desire to be secretly powerful. It was the right film at the right time; a story that tapped into the audience's zeitgeist.

This is the same reason why sometimes there is a glut of similar films that come at the same time. In the decade before the world economic collapse, clever screenwriters saw the way the wind was blowing and sensed that fears about losing essential societal infrastructures were uppermost in people's minds. So we got films like *Independence Day* (1996), *Dante's Peak* (1997), *Volcano* (1997), *Armageddon* (1998), *Deep Impact* (1998) and *War of the Worlds* (2005). When fears about climate change hit the news, films like *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) followed.



Exercise 1.6

Take three of the ideas you developed in Exercise 1.4 and see if you can link them to issues that seem to be prevalent in the world today. Look in both international news and local national stories for the things that currently impact many people's lives. Some things to consider are:

- The individual versus the state
- Tolerance versus intolerance
- Technology
- What the word 'society' means to people nowadays

Premise

Once you have developed a variety of story ideas and some thoughts on what issues your stories might explore, you can start to work towards the first crucial stage in developing a script idea: called the premise.

A premise is simply a statement of the core concept - the Big Idea we looked at in Project 2. A good premise states who the central character is and what the central dramatic problem of the story involves.

Here are some premise examples:

- *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). A group of aliens visit earth and one of them is lost and left behind on this planet. The alien is found by a lonely 10-year-old boy, Elliot, who hides him at home. Soon the two begin to communicate and start a different kind of relationship, in which E.T. learns about life on earth and Elliot learns about love and friendship. With the authorities closing in to capture the alien, E.T. needs to go home. But if Elliot helps him, he'll lose his only friend.
- *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Rookie FBI agent Clarice Starling is assigned to help find a missing woman and save her from serial killer 'Buffalo Bill', who skins his victims. Clarice attempts to gain a better insight into the twisted mind of the killer by talking to his former psychiatrist, an incarcerated psychopath called Dr Hannibal 'the Cannibal' Lecter. Hannibal holds the key to locating Buffalo Bill but the only way to get into Hannibal's head is to let him inside hers. Clarice must face her own personal demons before she captures Buffalo Bill.
- *Rushmore* (1998). Max Fischer is a precocious and determined scholarship student at the private Rushmore Academy where he has great success in organising clubs and plays but fails most of his academic classes. He befriends a rich industrialist, Blume, and falls for a recently widowed teacher, Ms Cross. When one of his schemes gets Max expelled, he dedicates himself to wooing Ms Cross, but finds that Blume loves her as well. Max seeks vengeance against his old mentor who retaliates and war breaks out between them. Max's sweet father, a simple barber, helps him to accept a more realistic place in the world.
- *What Women Want* (2000). Nick Marshall is a chauvinistic advertising executive who sees his mission in life as to bed as many women as he can. His life is turned upside down when a fluke accident leaves him with the ability to hear what women think. At first, all he wants to do is rid himself of this curse, until a wacky psychologist shows him that this could be used to his advantage. Nick's dream promotion has gone to new team member Darcy, so Nick decides to sabotage her by reading her thoughts and passing her ideas off as his own. But with his new insight, Nick finds himself falling in love with Darcy – and discovers that love is the cure to his problem.

In each of the examples given, note how specific each of the main characters are to the situation of the story. Not just any boy but a lonely boy finds a friend in the stranded alien. Who better to gain the ability to hear what women think than a chauvinist? Clarice Starling in *The Silence of the Lambs* needs to be a rookie so that she can be caught off-guard by Hannibal Lecter.



Exercise 1.7

Choose any film or television programme you have watched and see if you can formulate a one or two sentence premise statement of what the whole story is. Make sure you identify who the main character is, what the dramatic problem is, and how the main character engages with it.

Try it on three different films, with different kinds of stories.

Giving your film idea meaning

Films and television are stories told in a visual medium. Like all stories, they have a function: to communicate something to an audience that helps them understand themselves better, or to help them deal with life by reaffirming certain ideas such as 'good can conquer evil'; or 'love can triumph over hate', or 'it is possible to make order out of chaos', and so on. This creates a meaning for the film.

Once you have the story clear in a premise statement, you can then think about what issues, ideas or truths are being explored in the story and what 'meaning' emerges from the way the story is told.

Think of it this way: story is what happens in the film (stated in your premise). Meaning is what the story is *really* about (some people call this theme). The meaning of your idea is the reason you should want to write your story. It is what you, as a writer, believe – what you are saying, your value system, expressed through the action and drama of your story. In effect, it is the following:

- A message or statement of your beliefs.
- What you want to leave the audience thinking or feeling.
- What the main character learns narratively over the course of the story.

Types of theme

Every script will have its own meaning. However, its thematic concerns can be grouped under eight distinct types, which express the major human experiences and reflect common emotional needs. They fall mainly into two camps: desires and fears (plus one other about morality). They are:

1. *The desire for justice.* An injustice is seen to be done and we desire to see it corrected. How it is corrected and whether or not the initial injustice is corrected is up to the writer. Almost any crime enquiry or trial-based story illustrates this theme, in films such as *A Few Good Men* (1992), *Trial and Retribution* (TV; 1997–2009); *Silent Witness* (TV; 1996–present); *Twelve Angry Men* (1957). However, it can be found in other narratives as well; see *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1955); *Bitter Rice* (1949); *Enemy of the State* (1998).
2. *The desire for love.* The sense of being alone is experienced by most human beings and we desire to see how other people deal with that situation – in particular, how they meet the emotional need this often creates. How this need is met and whether or not it is ultimately fulfilled is up to the writer. All romances illustrate this theme; for example: *Casablanca* (1942); *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) / *Romeo + Juliet* (1996); *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001); *The Piano* (1993).
3. *The desire for order.* Chaos exists, or threatens, and we desire to see some order imposed to make everyday life possible. The source of the chaos, its consequences and the means by which it is tackled are up to the writer. Many murder mysteries and detective stories fall into this category, as would a futuristic film like *Blade Runner* (1982). In terms of individuals, this can be seen in *Lost Weekend* (1945); *Trainspotting* (1996); *Mr Bean* (TV; 1990–1995). With respect to society it can be seen in *Touch of Evil* (1958), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and most TV soaps.
4. *The desire for pleasure.* Pleasure is possible and we desire to share in the experience of it. The nature of the pleasure, its cost, if any, and how this is portrayed, is up to the writer. Comedies rely heavily on this theme, and many of them are about individual(s) in the pursuit of pleasure, such as *A Night at the Opera* (1935). The range of narratives which use this theme vary enormously from the obvious like *Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Sex But Were Afraid To Ask* (1972) to *The Naked Gun 2.5: The Smell of Fear* (1991) and *Bitter Moon* (1992).
5. *The desire for validation.* Every human being is unique. The question is, how much is this uniqueness a problem for the other human beings you live with, and for you? The recognition of this situation leads to a desire to validate the individual choices human beings make in a communal context. This is the basis of most personal dramas; for example: *Bagdad Cafe* (1987); *Thelma & Louise* (1991); *Flirting* (1991); *Boys from the Blackstuff* (TV; 1982); *American Beauty* (1999); *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962).
6. *The fear of death.* Mortality is a fact of life and we desire to see how people cope with the threat of death. How the threat arises and the means of dealing with it are up to the writer. This is the basis that underpins most horror films, but is also the basis of personal dramas such as *The Seventh Seal* (1957); *Ghost* (1990); *Yeeleen* (1987); *Terms of Endearment* (1983); *Steel Magnolias* (1989).

7. The fear of the unknown. No-one knows everything. Even collectively, humanity still struggles to grasp the enormity of life experiences on this planet, let alone the universe. In this context, every human being at some level recognises their inability to understand much of what happens to them and the world around them. The result is a desire to see how the unknown can be confronted and dealt with. This is the basis of many horror films and television such as *Quatermass and the Pit* (TV; 1958); *Alien* (1979) (see Project 5); *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984); *The X-Files* (TV; 1993–2002; 2016; 2018) ; also some sci-fi like *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982); *Forbidden Planet* (1956); *Signs* (2002); and some personal dramas like *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962).
8. The morality of individuals. A choice has to be made between doing something which is defined as good or something which is defined as bad. The nature of good and bad is dependent on the writer, as is the outcome of the choice. Examples of this include *The Searchers* (1956); *The Fisher King* (1991); *Rashomon* (1950); *Murder on the Orient Express* (1974 / 2017); *Se7en* (1995).

Notice that in each of the examples given, the thematic concern underpins the key main story and the motivation of the major characters. However, each screenplay will define its particular version of justice or fear of the unknown or whatever, and that is what will make the film or television drama different from every other one. It gives the writer a unique and original voice. That is the strength and power of thematic meaning.

It should be noted that premise and theme can – and indeed should – change as you develop your screenplay. Once you start working on characters and plotting the dramatic moments of your script, things might change. Do not panic about this: it is all part of the organic nature of creative writing.



Exercise 1.8

To illustrate how connected story premise and thematic meaning are, try this out. Here is a simple premise for a film story:

“A family firm of three builders (a father and two sons) are excavating a house for some clients. During the works, they uncover a suitcase filled with thousands of pounds of money. Now they must decide what to do about it.”

Now briefly make notes on how this story might work (from start to finish) in order to leave the audience thinking about each of the following thematic ideas in turn.

- Version 1: In this version of the film, you are going to make the film say to the audience: ‘Money is the root of all evil’. What might happen in the story and how might it resolve itself in order to say that?
- Version 2: Using exactly the same story premise, you are now going to tell a different version of the story that says to the audience: ‘There are more important things in life than money’. Now how would the story go?
- Version 3: Still the same story premise, but in this version you are going to say to the audience: ‘It is not always right to do the right thing’. What will happen in this version of the story?

Make notes on each of these in your writer’s notebook.

What you should have found is that while the basic premise of the story remains the same, the events of the story, the actions and decisions of the characters and – importantly – the final resolution to the story will be different depending on what the ‘message’ of the story is supposed to be.

This is what Aristotle discovered: telling a story is communicating with a purpose. You are looking to give your audience an interesting story with intriguing characters in a dramatic situation that explores some element of life, the human condition, morals or ideas. It is the reason you want to tell this story.



Exercise 1.9

Now turn your attention to developing your own idea for a script. It can be an idea for a feature film, for an hour of television, for a longer television series or for a short film (you may not even know which yet).

Take three of the various ideas you have noted in the exercises in Projects 2 and 3 and see if you can formulate a premise statement for each story. Try to keep them simple. A couple of sentences will do. Aim for approximately 100 words.

Project 4: Developing the story



"Your goal should be a good story, well told."

Robert McKee (McKee, 1999)

So far, we have determined that we need a few key things to create a good screenplay:

- A strong story
- Central main character(s) who the audience can identify with, and care whether they succeed or fail.
- The film should be 'about' something.
- As visual as possible.
- Original.

In previous exercises you began the process of developing a more concrete idea that – hopefully – addresses these points. Now we need to flesh the idea out from broad strokes to a complete, coherent story.

New writers often look at other areas of their script to disguise their difficulties with the core task: addressing story. They'll develop intricate quirky characterisation, dialogue so snappy it could take your hand off, ultra-violence, visual pyrotechnics of infinite variety, thematic postulating on any and every topic – anything other than the part that primarily engages the audience: the story!

It's not that these other elements aren't important – they are – but the core element, the heart of screenwriting, is story. And story is difficult, harder than any other element in screenwriting. It involves the writer making choices, and to keep making the right choice at every point along the way of the story's construction.

At the end of Project 3, then, you should have written three premise statements (however rough they may be). Now you are going to start making some decisions.



Research point

Some people believe that there are only a certain number of stories in the world and that everything we write is a variation of these (think the 'boy-meets-girl' love story, the character with a fatal flaw, the 'Cinderella' tale of a character with unrecognised virtue who is rewarded at the end, the naïve hero who cannot be put down). Then there are also genres such as horror, love story, adventure quest, western, and so on.

Look at the three premises you have written. Now compare them to existing stories and genres (maybe even existing films). Can you see any similarities? Could an existing story work as a model to help you tell your story (or part of it)?

Make notes in your writer's notebook of how you might apply story types to your premises.

Whatever your idea for a story is, and whether it fits into a story type, it needs to be full of potential for drama, surprise and complication, to keep the audience interested. If you dig a little further into existing stories and genres (alongside what Aristotle discovered), you will find that the individual elements that make the story progress from start to finish, all work in the same way: there is a problem, the main character goes through a series of struggles, and then a resolution is reached.

So, beyond the idea of story types and genres, we can go one step further and say that in screenwriting there is in fact only one basic story that matters. And it is this:

"Somebody wants something really badly, but has difficulty getting it."

Every film and television story revolves around that simple model. There is a main character (the *somebody*) who is trying to get or do or achieve a particular thing (the *something*) but encounters problems or obstacles that make it hard to get what they want. These problems need to be solved.

What is even more important about that definition of your film story is that it is a literal definition of conflict. Conflict generates drama, drama creates emotion, and emotion keeps the story interesting for the audience.

So, if you can get those elements clear in your head for your script ideas, you will already be half way there in having a story filled with conflict.



Exercise 1.10

For each of your three premise statements, clearly define all the following points:

- Who is the *somebody*? (This will be your main character.)
- What do they *want*? (Specifically, what they are trying to do, get or achieve in this story?)
- How *badly* do they want it? (Think why it matters to the character and what they would be willing to do to get what they want; how far might they go?)
- What kind of *difficulty* could stand in their way? (This is the part you will most likely need to work at; think obstacles, problems, villains – you will need several.)

Fleshing out the story

Once you have a rough idea of what your story might be, then you can start looking for some of the detail that will make it flow as a narrative. You should keep in mind the need for things like surprise and cause-and-effect.

The main story of your film will concern your main character locked in a dramatic struggle.

- Early in the film, there will be an initial, small event that creates some desire or goal in your main character.
- Then there will be two bigger events (plus other mini events) that challenge this desire – motivating and amplifying the main character's resolve.
- The fourth, final, and largest event, brings the struggle for that desire to a satisfying end (resulting in success or failure for your main character).

Once you have a few of the key parts of the story, you can start thinking of the bits in between. In this way, you can gradually build up your complete film story.

Here you will encounter one of the first real tests of your film idea: will it work on screen? A script story needs to work on screen. It needs to be visual. Some writers misunderstand this, thinking that they have to write copious descriptions of scenery or clever camerawork. This is not what developing screen story is about.

What it means is that there should be a strong outer story that can be filmed (and ultimately shown to an audience). Many otherwise good ideas would work better on stage or on radio. If you find that many of the parts of your story rely on characters talking, or takes place mostly inside a character's head, then you may have to rethink. Maybe it shouldn't be a screen story at all.

That is not to say that these kinds of stories cannot work. Think, for example, of courtroom dramas or intense personal stories about family breakdown. But in these kinds of stories you will have to compensate with other skills such as writing high tension or strong dialogue. American scriptwriter Aaron Sorkin is a master at this. Many of his scripts such as *The West Wing* (TV; 1999–2006), *The Social Network* (2010), *Moneyball* (2011) and *Steve Jobs* (2015) have long

scenes of nothing but talk, where Sorkin uses dialogue to create deep psychological drama and build tension between characters and their world.

Nevertheless, if you can develop your story through a series of events – characters doing things and taking action – then your script will definitely be working as a screen story.

Below is an example of key events for the film *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994). Notice that it doesn't include everything – just the key important details that hold the story together. That's what you are looking for at this early development stage.

1. Andy is arrested for the murder of his wife and sent to prison with two life sentences.
2. Andy has trouble settling into prison; he is attacked and oppressed by the gang called The Sisters.
3. Andy becomes a useful member of the prison: befriending Red, doing the guards' taxes, managing the warden's accounts. He struggles to build a library in the prison.
4. Tommy appears with evidence that could get Andy out but is then killed by the warden. Andy digs his tunnel and escapes to freedom.



Exercise 1.11

Now create a similar breakdown for your premises (or choose one to try it on). Use the *The Shawshank Redemption* model above as your template.

See if you can create the major points or events along the path of your story.

Project 5: Writing the synopsis

Writing a synopsis is the next essential tool in the screenwriter's box of tricks. A synopsis is 500 to 1,000 words that tells the story of your film, concentrating on the central character and the main dramatic throughline of the film.

Screenwriters use synopses in a number of ways:

- As a marketing tool. Script readers or producers sometimes request a synopsis before reading a script in its entirety. If they like the idea in principle, they will commit to reading the screenplay. Storytelling is the lifeblood of film and television and you should use your synopsis to hook readers' attention and get them excited to read the next big document – all the way up to the screenplay. The point of a synopsis is not just to tell the story but to show how the story will be told on screen. The reader should get a real sense of what it is going to be like to see this.
- For funding. Providing a synopsis is usually part of the funding application process.
- For good creative practice. It helps you to clarify your own story and to understand its essential components. Good screenwriters use synopses as problem-solving tools. If something in the plot is not working yet (such as a weak ending or a slow start) it is better to solve it in 500 words than it is to write 100 pages of screenplay only to find you have to go back and start re-working the story!

A good synopsis should:

- Set out the main character and locations in your story.
- Include the problems and challenges the main character faces and how they will overcome them.
- Tell the whole of your story clearly from start to finish.
- Include only what will be seen or heard on screen (visuals and action). Don't write any dialogue yet – save it for the script.
- Be written in a way that communicates the tone and atmosphere of your story (if you are writing a comedy, write funny words; if you are writing a horror film, use words and description that make the hair on the back of the reader's neck stand up).
- Be written in the present tense, using active verbs and descriptive nouns to give the story immediacy and help captivate your reader.

As you develop your script, you'll find yourself refining your synopsis. This is all part of the creative process which should be organic and changeable. As your story evolves and you begin to know it inside out, you'll continue to fine-tune your synopsis.

Your assignment for this part of the course will be to write the synopsis for your own original screen story idea. To help you, following are two examples of synopses for films which you should recognise. These are the kinds of things you should be aiming for.

FILM SYNOPSIS EXAMPLE

WITNESS (1985) by Earl W. Wallace & William Kelley

Several days after her husband's funeral, Amish widow RACHEL LAPP and her six-year-old son, SAMUEL, depart for Baltimore to visit her sister. At the train station in Philadelphia, Samuel enters a restroom and is the sole witness to a murder.

JOHN BOOK, the investigating detective in charge, reveals that the murdered man was a police officer. Samuel says two men were involved in the crime, but he could only see one – a tall African-American man. Despite Rachel wanting nothing to do with Book's laws, Samuel is taken around town to identify suspects, but fails to find a match.

At the police station, Samuel sees a displayed press photograph of Lieutenant MCFEE, and identifies him as the murderer. Worried, Book turns to his mentor, Chief SCHAEFFER, for help.

Shortly after, McFee engages Book in a parking garage gunfight and Book is hit in the abdomen. The injured Book deduces Schaeffer and McFee are both dirty and working together. After destroying records to hide the location of Samuel's home, Book sneaks Rachel and the boy out of the city to their farm in rural Lancaster County. Moments after dropping them off, Book passes out behind the wheel.

Rachel's father-in-law, ELI, reluctantly agrees to put up the "English" man and arranges for an Amish apothecary to treat the bullet wound using traditional methods.

Adopting Amish dress to be inconspicuous as he recovers, Book, an amateur carpenter, fits into the community fairly well – making toys for Samuel and helping in a barn raising.

As the weeks pass, he begins to fall in love with Rachel, who has mutual feelings for him. Their attraction is met by disapproval of the elders, who consider having Rachel shunned.

Meanwhile, Eli lectures young Samuel about the English man's use of the 'gun of the hand' and tendency for violence ('What you take into your hands you take into your heart').

In town, Book witnesses youths harassing the Amish. Book severely beats the youths and, as the Amish are pacifists, word of this unusual occurrence spreads quickly. Book realizes his cover is blown and Schaeffer will soon find him. Book prepares to leave the farm, sharing a passionate embrace with Rachel.

Schaeffer, McFee, and a third corrupt officer (the second murderer) arrive the next morning to kill Book. Unarmed, Book uses his wits to defeat the two cops before Schaeffer holds him at gunpoint. Thinking quick, Samuel rings the farm bell, alerting his neighbors to a problem.

Schaeffer, knowing he cannot kill all the amassed Amish witnesses, surrenders.

Afterward, as Book prepares to leave, he exchanges a silent, loving gaze with Rachel before driving back to Philadelphia. Eli caringly tells Book to "be careful out among them English."

FILM SYNOPSIS EXAMPLE

ALIEN (1979) by Dan O'Bannon

The cargo ship Nostromo is in deep space when its seven-strong crew are woken from suspended animation to investigate a radio transmission, of unknown origin, emanating from a small moon in a nearby planetary system. The crew - especially grumbling mechanics PARKER and BRETT - resent the interruption to their normal duties but company rules require them to investigate any possible contact with intelligent life-forms or forfeit their pay. With some difficulty, the Nostromo's satellite ship, the Narcissus, crash-lands on the moon and is damaged in the process. As Parker and Brett start repairs, an exploratory team of ship's captain DALLAS, executive officer KANE and navigator LAMBERT set out to find the source of the apparent distress signal. The moon's atmosphere is hostile, with raging blizzards and short days; time is limited. The coolly detached science officer ASH watches them on a screen, while warrant officer RIPLEY tries to analyse the mysterious transmission. Her conclusions are disturbing: it seems to be not a distress call, as they thought at first, but a warning. She cannot communicate this to the team, however, as they have lost radio and video contact with them. Dallas, Kane and Lambert find an extraordinary sight: a crashed and deserted alien spaceship whose humanoid crew are all long dead - 'they look like they exploded from the inside.' Kane discovers a vast underground chamber; on its floor is a group of leathery, egg-shaped objects. As Kane examines them more closely he sees a pulsating life-form inside one of them. It cracks open and a creature leaps out, breaking open his helmet and covering his face.

Dallas and Lambert struggle back to the Narcissus, carrying the unconscious Kane on a makeshift stretcher. At the airlock, learning that an alien life-form has attacked Kane, Ripley refuses to let them in. The crew's dilemma is acute: if Kane remains outside, he will undoubtedly die; if he's brought in, the ship and crew could be contaminated. It's Ash who overrides Ripley's authority and opens the airlock door.

In the sick bay Dallas and Ash examine Kane, but can do nothing for him. The Alien takes the form of a hand which covers his face, but includes a tube, inserted down Kane's throat, which is feeding him oxygen. The Alien has put Kane

in a coma but is also keeping him alive. They're terrified that if they attempt to remove it, he will die. When Ash tries to cut through one of the 'fingers' with a laser scalpel, the alien bleeds acid blood which eats through two levels of the ship's structure before it can be stopped. As Parker remarks, 'Great defense mechanism - we don't dare kill it.' Ripley confronts Ash, asking why he risked their lives to bring the Alien aboard, but he defends his decision in the interests of science: having discovered an alien life-form, they must study it.

The Narcissus takes off from the moon and rejoins the Nostromo, although repairs have not been completed. Abruptly the hand-thing 'lets go' of Kane and is found, shrivelled and inert, in a corner of the sick bay. Kane recovers consciousness and, though hungry and thirsty, seems unharmed; he remembers nothing except 'some horrible dream about smothering.'

Delighted at his recovery the crew have a meal together - but the celebration is short-lived. Kane begins coughing and choking, then convulses. A small, fearsome creature bursts out of his stomach, tearing him open and killing him, and escapes before the horrified crew can collect themselves.

When Kane's body has been jettisoned into space, the crew divide into teams of three, searching the vast ship to try and track the Alien down. Ripley, Parker and Brett think they have captured something but it turns out to be Ripley's cat JONES. Brett goes to find the cat, which has fled; and just as he has found the terrified feline the Alien kills him. The Alien is literally feeding on the crew and growing at an exponential rate.

The Alien is using the ship's ventilation system to move around so - armed with makeshift flamethrowers - they plan to drive it into the main airlock and expel it into space. Ash has developed scanners which show when any life-form is near; but they only have a range of a few yards, making the Alien undetectable until it's really close. Dallas volunteers to crawl through the ventilation system and track the creature down; but as the rest of the crew watch, horrified, the Alien pounces and kills him.

With Dallas and Kane dead, Ripley is now in command. Furious at the lack of help from science officer Ash, she goes into the computer room to talk to ship's computer 'Mother'. As

she interrogates the system she comes across a numbered directive and learns that the priority imposed by the ship's company is to protect the Alien and return it alive. The crew are 'expendable'. Ash has silently entered the supposedly secure computer room and is sitting next to her. Ripley confronts him, realising that he knows about, and is obeying, the directive - he's been protecting the Alien all along.

She contacts the other two, but as she goes to join them Ash follows and attacks her with insane strength. Parker and Lambert find them, Parker swings an iron bar at Ash, decapitating him - and revealing a mass of wires. Ash is an android.

At Ripley's insistence, they put Ash back together sufficiently so that he/it can talk, but he/it cannot suggest any way to defeat the Alien - in fact, logically, it is indestructible. He admires it. Parker turns a flamethrower on to Ash, incinerating him/it.

Without Ash to worry about, another option has become available: the crew can set the ship to self-destruct and hope that the Alien will be destroyed in the resulting nuclear explosion. They will abandon ship, using an escape pod which only takes three people. As Ripley goes to the bowels of the Nostromo to set the ship's own self-destruct program in motion, Parker and Lambert go together to collect supplies. They are in radio contact and Ripley hears a commotion, then Lambert's screams, as the Alien attacks them. Ripley runs to the supply area, arriving to find her companions dead and the Alien nowhere to be found. She is the only human being left. She collects the cat Jones, and makes her way into the escape pod, leaving the Narcissus seconds before the ship explodes.

Numb with shock, exhausted, RIPLEY prepares to go into hypersleep - only to find that the Alien has got into the escape pod with her and is still very much alive. Changing into her space suit and strapping herself down she opens the airlock, and the Alien is sucked out into the vacuum of space; but it still clings to the ship. Only when she empties a tank of liquid nitrogen over it, does it finally let go and fragment. Ripley records a message saying what has happened, listing her dead companion's names, and puts herself and Jones into hypersleep, drifting in space in the hope that someone, somewhere will pick them up.

Assignment One

This first assignment is about introducing yourself so that your tutor can get to know you, your ideas and your work better. It should take you between two and three hours of study time. This assignment is not submitted for formal assessment.

Before you attempt the assignment task below, read through each project again, checking that you've understood them first time round. Check that you have worked through the research points and exercises.

Now re-read the three premises you developed in Project 4. Choose the premise you like the best (or come up with a new one based on the exercises you have done) and develop the idea into a synopsis for an original script.

- Aim to write a minimum of 500 words, maximum of 1,000 words (between one and three pages).
- Make sure you include the location, time, genre, the main character, the challenges they face, and the beginning, middle and end.

Refer to the sample synopses as a guide.

This is an opportunity to run your ideas past your tutor and to discuss their potential. You may end up using this (or one of your other ideas) for your final assignment – but at this stage they don't have to be perfect! There is plenty of time for you to develop them with the help of your tutor.

Reflective commentary

Also send to your tutor a reflective commentary on your experience of this first part of the course. This will be a synthesis of your writer's notebook so far. Write about 500 words for this first attempt.

Don't forget to review this assignment against the assessment criteria. Review how you think you have done against the criteria and make notes in your writer's notebook.

Make sure that all work is labelled with your name, student number and assignment number. You don't need to wait until you've heard from your tutor before continuing with the course.