

HOW TO WRITE A SCREENPLAY

A Basic Guide

By Dorian Scott Cole

Screenwriting Golden Road To Adventure

Writing a screenplay is like no other adventure! You, the writer, get to experience other characters and their way of looking at things. You get to share something you know about life. And telling stories is fun!

Your story might be filmed. Short stories are often used by film students for production projects. And selling a produced screenplay could earn in multiples of \$20,000.00.



Imagine the thrill of someday seeing your stories on the screen and bumping elbows with famous people!¹ So if you're ready for a really good time, sharpen your pencil and I will try to get you on your way. Click on a [colored tab](#) → to begin. You can also click [here](#) to read this like a book or click [here](#) for the Contents.

¹All writing careers are very competitive and often require years of experience to establish.

HOW TO WRITE A SCREENPLAY

A Basic Guide

(In print, Published by National Writers Workshop as: How To Write A Screenplay - A Guide For High School Students)

By Dorian Scott Cole

CONTENTS

About

Contents

HIT & RUN

Quick Start Summary

Dramatic Structure with Prom Date Sample Story Synopsis

GETTING STARTED

What To Write

Writing Methods

SCREENPLAY FUNDAMENTALS

Characterization

The Plot

The Scene

Dialogue

Set-ups For Short Scripts

Characters For Short Scripts

Format

Rewriting the Best Kept Secret In Hollywood



HELPFUL THINGS

Stolen Property Statement

Teacher's Information

Resources

[The People At Writers Workshop](#)

[The Writers Workshop Process](#)

Navigation:

You can click the browse buttons >> to go to the next topic (<< to go back)

Click hypertext to go to that topic:

[Continue to the next topic: *Quick Start Summary*](#)

[Contents](#)



Quick Start Summary

Use this summary to start creating your screenplay right away. Then use it for a handy reference to detailed information as you write. Have a great time and good luck!

If you want to make notes for yourself as you go, click the Notepad icon above, or on the information text for more information.

What To Write:

Click the green text to see the full topic.

Write about what interests you. It will be more fun and if it interest you it will probably interest others.

- Unusual things and surprises really get attention (but don't get too radical).
- If the outcome of the story is predictable, I can predict a lullaby rating.
- Humor can be a helpful element in any story, but too much humor spoils it.
- One page equals about one minute of screen time, so shoot for ten to thirty pages, which is typically about three to twelve scenes. **Hint:** it's easier in some ways to write thirty pages than ten because shorter stories require more intensity.

Writing Methods:

Click the green text to see the full topic.

Use the method best suited to you - just get started. At some early point you should write out the plot or story line so you don't waste ten erasers.

Making Fascinating Characters:

Click the green text to see the full topic.

Creating characters who have real wants and needs is a great place to start. Often the best stories come straight from the characters.

Create your main character and an opposing character, then a couple of friends. Throw them together in a situation where they're struggling for something they want, and there it is - the story writes itself.

Dramatic Structure:

Click the green text to see the full topic.

Stories have three acts... exciting acts! Grab a pencil and write your own outline using

this one as an example. You'll be surprised how easy it is.

Act I grabs our attention like cool drinks on a hot beach. Main characters dazzle us with their entrances, and a problem we're dying to see solved develops into a big crisis: **somebody wants something really really (way) badly!** For example, Tom wants to star in the basketball final, needs to complete his rock collection for geology, but needs an A on his calculus final to pass high school, both are tomorrow - and he hasn't studied all semester!

The crisis launches us into Act II, which will be about fifty percent of the story. There the main character (Tom) struggles to get his prize. But the problems get bigger and bigger, draining his strength and destroying his will. Tom's worst enemy is the only person in town who has the rock he needs. Tom sprains his ankle. He realizes all this talk in calculus about triangles was about math, not art. And his girl friend is dumping him. Beaten and broken he must do the impossible - which moves the story into Act III.

We're on the edge of our seats going into Act III! Will Tom win this final battle and get his rock collection gathered from eighty city blocks (where his angry girl friend dumped them), and ace the calculus test, and win the ball game with a sprained ankle? Some way Tom succeeds at something important and learns something in the process. Easy, isn't it? Dramatic structure is explained in more detail in a sample story line, [Prom Date](#). Click the green text to see the full topic.

[The Plot:](#)

What is going to happen in your story? The basic plot is the main source of conflict, which creates tension. Plots have to have conflict to keep our interest. Tension comes from the main characters opposing each other or striving for something. Then all the details that drive the story this way and that make up the full plot. Writing the full story without knowing the plot, is a gamble that everything will work, and frequently it doesn't.

Click the green text to see the full topic.

[The Scene:](#)

The fundamental building block of screenplays. It lasts an average of three minutes and takes place in one location. When the location or time changes, it is a new scene. Think of scenes as situations that are like a mini-story.

Click the green text to see the full topic.

[Dialogue:](#)

Dialogue is what people say: their exact words without quotation marks or *he said, she felt, she remembered*, etc. Each line of dialogue should be as short as possible - don't talk to us like you talk to your friends.

Click the green text to see the full topic.

[Set-ups and Characters For Short Scripts:](#)

Ten to twenty page short scripts make special demands on character and plot. Make it easier on yourself - *read more about this*.

Click the green text to see the full topic.

[Format:](#)

Screenplays follow an easy format; and if they're not in it, no one will read it.

[See the example.](#)

Click the green text to see the full topic.

[Rewriting:](#) The best kept secret in Hollywood.

[BEWARE!](#)

Some mistakes will earn you the title of *amateur*. Avoid these things and you'll look good on paper.

Click the green text to see the full topic.

[Getting Feedback:](#)

The best thing to do is talk to others about your story and get their input (unless you're very sensitive). Ask others what they would do in a situation similar to your character's. *Not an expanded topic.*

Click the green text to see the full topic.

[Stolen Property Statement:](#) Major studios are honest and million dollar lawsuits discourage the dishonest from plagiarizing stories. But chances are, if you have an idea, you will see something like it within the next three years.

Click the green text to see the full topic.

[Teacher's Information:](#)

Students may safely skip this part unless they are afraid the teacher is learning secrets they should know.

Click the green text to see the full topic.

You can read this like a book if you want, or select topics at random. To read this like a book, click the colored text with the double underlines at the end of each topic and section. To return to a previous topic, click the Back button at the top. Click the Back button repeatedly to return to a topic that is several jumps back.

If you found the way this material was presented was helpful (or you hated it), please drop me a line in care of [National Writers Workshop](#), or send me an Internet e-mail message: scole@visualword.com (Nov 96). Your feedback will help me prepare future resources. Please don't send stories, summaries, or ideas. - Scott

Navigation:

You can click the browse buttons >> to go to the next topic (<< to go back)

Click hypertext to go to that topic:

[*Quick Start Summary*](#)

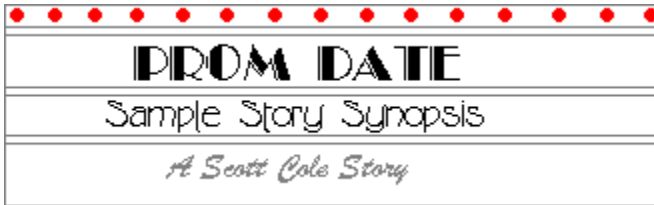
[Continue to the next topic: Dramatic Structure With Prom Date Illustration](#)

[Contents](#)



Dramatic structure with Prom Date story illustration

Every story has three parts. This is called the three act structure. Stories develop better if you have the three act structure in the back of your mind. Studying story structure is exciting... I can not tell a lie - actually it can be mind numbing. So lets not study structure. Instead, see if you can pick out the important elements in a sample story, Prom Date, a story of personal triumph. (Prom Date is a half-hour to one-hour story.)



Act I: The drama in the first few minutes must be powerful enough to captivate the viewer. So some conflict, or problem, builds and builds until the good guy (protagonist) decides he has to solve it. Try to see a conflict developing in Act 1.

The Prom is days away. Shaun doesnt have a date and his sister Elizabeth teases him mercilessly. He wishes he could get a date with Laura for the prom. But just as he is about to ask Elizabeth if she thinks Laura would go with him, Shaun sees Laura ride away with a bunch of girls. They are waving to Dave the Geek. Shaun wonders what Laura could possibly see in a geek.

Shaun is shy, so he asks his best friend Tim to fix him up with Laura. Tim pretends to ask Laura to date Shaun, but instead he tells Laura lies about Shaun. Laura is sorry to hear the negative stories - she likes Shaun. She thanks Tim for being such a friend.

Shaun and Tim are preparing for an experimental model plane match. Shaun can't get his model plane wings the right size so it will fly, but Tim's plane flies like a jet. Discouraged, Shaun lets his race car plane drive into a wall where it breaks into pieces. He declares to everyone that the prom is the only meaningful event for the entire year for him. He isnt going to study or work on his plane - he is going to finish the year by getting a date with Laura.

The point where characters make major decisions and shove the story in a new direction is called a turning point.

So, what is the conflict? A bad plane? A bad year in school? Shaun wants to date Laura? Shauns best friend Tim is a rat? The big conflict for Shauns year is getting a date with Laura. The audience knows by the end of part one what the story is about, and what the main conflict is.

No problems get fixed in Act I Or Act II. Act II is the main part of the play - over half of the story. Its the part where the story can sag, and the audience leaves the theater cursing all the names in the opening credits. But in a well plotted Act II, the tension rises as the conflict gets bigger and bigger. The good guy finds the problem gets harder and harder to solve. With each try he fails, while the bad guy (antagonist) laughs at him. The audience sits spellbound while the good guy (protagonist) struggles to get what he wants. Try to spot the things in Act II that make the problem bigger.

Act II: Shaun tries to impress Laura and ask her for the date, but Dave the Geek is always with her and always getting in the way. Shaun thinks Dave is his rival, so Shaun tries to outdo Dave in math class. Dave makes Shaun look like a kindergarten mathematician.

Tim tries to convince Shaun that Laura is out of his league - she only dates the really smart guys who are headed for college. Trying to get a date with her is hopeless.

Shaun shows up at her door one afternoon in his old car. He tries again to ask for a date and she humors him. Before Shaun finishes, a wealthy college guy, Colin, shows up in a cool new car and leaves with Laura. Shaun learns that Laura is now dating this guy, destroying Shaun's hopes.

Tim tells a friend that Colin is secretly seeing someone else, is using Laura, and is going to dump her just before the prom. Tim expects to catch her on the rebound.

Shaun broods in his room. His father fixed a part that Shaun thought was broken forever and gives it to him. Together they put the plane back together. But that evening, Shaun gets hopelessly stuck on a math problem that would help him correct the lift ratio on his experimental model plane. He leaves a message on an Internet newsgroup, but an answer might not come for days.

The next day Shaun gets stuck waiting with Dave in a car in the rain at a ball game. He can hardly bring himself to ask Dave for help, but finally tells Dave he knows of a problem Dave couldnt solve, and they start to work on the math problem. Dave shows Shaun that he almost has the answer, all he had to do was keep working on it. Shaun says, I wish everything in life was that way. They get into a conversation about wanting things, and Shaun finally tells that he wants something he cant have - Laura. Dave reveals he had no interest in Laura, he was just tutoring her in math - Dave's girl friend goes to a private school. Shaun asks Dave how to talk to Laura. Dave says, "Just like you talk to me, like a person." Then Dave tells him a secret: Colin's real girl friend also

goes to the private school, and Colin is dating Laura to make his real girl friend jealous.

What happens in Act II? Does the tension build? First Dave is in Shauns way when he tries to ask for a date, then Shaun tries to outdo Dave but makes himself look stupid instead. Tim then tries to convince Shaun that Laura is just out of reach for him. That advice had to hurt, coming from his best friend. Shaun tries one more time to ask for a date, but his worst fears are realized - Colin is there and is dating Laura. How big is the problem - how demoralized is Shaun? Shaun broods in his room and goes back to working on his model plane. He has lost - its hopeless. This is usually what happens in Act II.

But another thing also usually happens in Act II. Just when things look darkest, there is a glimmer of hope, and the good guy decides he is going to fight for all he is worth to get what he wants. This puts us into Act III.

In Act III the good guy confronts his worst fears, fights his biggest battle, and wins. Thats life - some day, some way, we win what we want. Or we learn something from the battle and change direction. The victories are what we write stories about. The other battles just continue another day maybe years in the future, or we change direction - we never lose except when were the bad guy. See how hard Shaun has to fight for what he wants in Act III.

Act III: Shaun races to Laura's home, but Colin's car is parked in the drive and they are sitting on the front porch. Shaun circles the block, working up courage, then goes to Laura. Shaun asks Colin when he is going to stop seeing this other girl. Colin angrily denies he is seeing the other girl. Colin goes on the attack and begins spouting the same lies Tim had told Laura. Shaun denies them, but Colin says that Shauns best friend Tim is the one who revealed all this dirt about him - so they know it is true.

Shaun is badly shaken. His best friend has lied about him, and the girl he cares about believes it. He knows he looks bad and begins to back away. Then he remembers his conversation with Dave about being so close to solving a problem if he would just work a little longer on it - and he remembers what good thing happened when he talked to Dave instead of hating him. He realizes backing away isnt the thing he should do. He turns back and refutes all the lies, then says again that Colin is just using Laura according to Dave. Laura knows Dave wouldnt lie. Colin sees he has been destroyed and flees. Shaun asks Laura to the prom. Without hesitation she says, "Yes."

Prom night, Laura tells Shaun that Tim and Colin are friends. Shaun confronts Tim with the lies on the dance floor, and Tim exits, so embarrassed he leaves his date standing by herself on the dance floor. The next day at the model plane match, Shaun's and Tim's planes compete. Shaun's wins the match. Shaun leaves with Laura, Dave, and the trophy.

Did Shaun have his biggest battle that brought out his inner strength? Confronting Colin and the pack of lies took a lot of courage, and Shaun had to overcome his fear of talking to people to do it. Did he get what he wanted?

What else went into making this story?

Stories have a lot of things in them that make them work. Understanding your characters hopes and fears is a major step in creating the drama. The drama in a play results from the conflict between the characters, and from each character's struggles. (Conflict is the heart of drama.) Each character adds a bit of conflict: Shaun's sister teases him. Tim betrays Shaun. Laura likes Shaun, but Tim dashes her hopes as well as Shaun's. Shaun is jealous of Dave the Geek. Shaun's plane won't fly.

During Act I the major characters are introduced. If they just walk on and chat for a moment, no one will remember them. The best way to introduce them is to show them involved in some problem or conflict during Act I, and the sooner the better. By the end of Act 1, all the main characters show us what they want to do, and launch themselves on a collision course. But the most important moment is the turning point when the main character becomes determined he is going to get what he wants.

In Act II, the real problem is disguised. It is Shaun's fear of communicating (actually fear of rejection or failure). His fear prevents him from talking to people. If he had asked Laura instead of using his sister and best friend, he would have gotten the date immediately. If he had talked to Dave, he would have solved his model plane problem much earlier, and also never have thought that Dave was his rival for Laura.

Sometimes the situation changes into something else. For example the antagonist (bad guy) turns out to be a good guy and someone else is the bad guy. In *Prom Date*, Tim turns out to be the bad guy and Dave turns out to be the good guy. This is called a plot twist. The viewer sometimes knows what is really going on, and other times is completely surprised. Whether to let the viewer in on everything is part of strategy. If it is a surprise, it has to look real, not like something added at the last minute to make a surprise.

Act III typically is short. The story comes to a climax, resolution and denouement. The climax is the (highest point of tension) - the big battle, and resolution means the conflict is resolved - over forever.

The denouement (French, pronounced: day noo má, - I pronounced this denouement in my first college theater class and was very embarrassed) ties up loose ends and satisfies the viewer's emotions. In this story, the subplot of the model airplane contest concludes the story. Shaun wins the race, rubbing Villain Tim's face in the dirt. Shaun has a new friend, Dave, and walks away with Laura. Often stories have no denouement, ending at the resolution (especially thrillers and other action movies).

When it's over, it's over.

Optional Review Questions (Do these! These are fun.)

Hey! You're trying to skip these and I put a lot of work into making these fun. You probably think you haven't learned a thing, but see what you know already - this isn't a test, it's reinforcement, and it will make you feel good and maybe get you a date... Maybe not if you're wearing loose fitting clothes with large vegetable patterns.

1) The three act structure:

- a. Is a bogus contrivance of Aristotle, who lived thousands of years before film and television, before anyone really knew anything.
- b. Can be used to help develop the very different sections of a story.
- c. Write the wrong answer here: _____

2) The protagonist is:

- a. The main character.
- b. The good guy (usually).
- c. The character who is struggling hardest to attain something.
- d. All of the above.

3) The antagonist:

- a. Works against the good guy.
- b. Has mud on his hat and antagonizes the good guy.
- c. Is usually the bad guy.
- d. a and c look right, but will have to get back to me about b.

4) Act I:

- a. Hooks the audience with powerful drama (conflict).
- b. Introduces the main characters with strong entrances (usually).
- c. Shows us what the story is about.
- d. Ends with a turning point where the protagonist decides to go after what he wants.
- e. Hopefully all of the above.

5) Act II:

- a. Is the name of wearing apparel.
- b. Sags badly because nothing much happens until the end.
- c. Is where the protagonist meets problems that get bigger and bigger, until he

finally is almost defeated, but finds the strength to go after the prize in a final battle, which takes us into Act Three.

d. Is a waste of time because you really can just cut to the chase.

6) Act III:

a. Is where the protagonist faces his biggest challenge and reaches his goal.

b. Is the denouement where everything winds down and ties up loose ends.

c. Is the third obstacle where the protagonist falls flat on his face.

d. a. and b. are correct. Hey! You with the hair! *This* is the right answer.

7) A turning point is:

a. Where the character makes a major change in direction or intensity.

b. Where the story makes a major change in direction or intensity.

c. Where the audience gets up and leaves the theater.

d. a. and b. are probably correct, but sometimes c. is unfortunately true.

8) The denouement is:

a. The ending.

b. Comes after the resolution.

c. When the audience becomes emotionally satisfied with the outcome.

d. a. b. and c. all have possibilities. Go figure.

Navigation:

You can click the browse buttons >> to go to the next topic (<< to go back)

Click hypertext to go to that topic:

[Quick Start Summary](#)

[Continue to the next topic: What To Write - It's Up To You](#)

[Contents](#)



GETTING STARTED

What To Write - It's Up To You

Write about what interests you. Chances are if it interests you it will interest someone else. And if it interests you, you will write a much better story.

Write about what you know; not necessarily your personal experience, but something you have knowledge about. Knowing plays better than guessing.

Every story, even science fiction and far out comedy, is about life. Stories tell us something about the human condition. In comedy, we laugh at ourselves, the absurd, and the unexpected, making life more acceptable. In science fiction, we ponder the blanks in our knowledge, especially about life. In horror, we confront our fears, reminding ourselves what it means to live and be human. In action/adventure, we enjoy life and explore our limits and fantasies. In drama, we dwell on other dimensions of ourselves.

All stories, even if just for entertainment or escapism, talk about life - the difference is the attitude they are presented with. The stories liked best are life affirming - triumphant. If it entertains and triumphs, it affects the viewer's attitude.

Writing about what interests you is best, but if you want to go for the gold, unique stories are in the most demand. A unique story is more likely to get attention.

What sells best? Action/adventure. What is always in demand? Romantic comedy. What isn't a good gamble? The movies that are currently hot probably won't get any interest in a few months even though they may be followed quickly by several copycats.

Hint: Mystery and discovery are elements that add a lot of interest to stories. Discovery can be about being human, or about anything unique and interesting in the entire universe.

Navigation:

You can click the browse buttons >> to go to the next topic (<< to go back)

Click hypertext to go to that topic:

[Quick Start Summary](#)

[Continue to the next topic: Writing Methods - Pick A Method, Any Method](#)

[Contents](#)



Writing Methods - Pick A Method, Any Method

Everyone writes stories differently. Some just write from beginning to end, then rewrite. This way is sometimes considered more creative and fun, but there are frustrating dangers. The characters tend to completely take over the story and go in the wrong direction, and sometimes the story drifts around and goes nowhere. Another way to write is to make an outline so you know exactly how the story will end. For example, if you sketched out a few ideas while you were reading the three paragraph description of [dramatic structure](#) you actually created a brief outline. Outlining, then writing, is more disciplined, and can be just as creative and fun. Whichever way you write, it's best to have some idea of where your story is going before you write so you don't waste your time.

Following are two methods you might use to write your screenplay. I hope you find this helpful.

Method 1: Have fun making your story! Write the beginning of your story and let it flow from you naturally. Let the characters do what they want. Become familiar with your characters and what is happening in their lives. After you have begun the story, start thinking ahead. What kinds of things might happen? Read the section on characterization. What should happen to these people? Read the section on Dramatic Structure. How should the story develop and end? As you read, jot down a few notes about these things. This is the simplest form of plotting or outlining. I'll help you with some of the finer details in the following paragraphs.

Method 2: the more recommended method: Have fun making your story! Think up three or more characters and write notes about their past. I recommend notes about the major events and people who have shaped a character's life. What are your character's hobbies and goals? Who do they like and hate, and why? Read the section on Characterization. Now bring your characters together in a setting and situation and let them interact. Good stories often start from character. After you know your characters, what they want, and how they interact, begin to plot the story. Let the characters determine what happens - don't use them as puppets. Read the section on Dramatic Structure. I'll help you with some of the finer details in the following paragraphs.

Navigation:

You can click the browse buttons >> to go to the next topic (<< to go back)

Click hypertext to go to that topic:

[Quick Start Summary](#)

[Continue to the next topic: Screenplay Fundamentals](#)

[Contents](#)



SCREENPLAY FUNDAMENTALS

Characterization - Where It All Begins

Let's make a character. Take a pair of scissors and paper and cut out a paper doll. Perfectly blank cutouts. How many people do you think this blank paper doll is going to interest? Exactly no one! That's why many stories fall flat on their face - their characters are blank as a paper doll.

Let's give the doll a name. His (or her) name is Chris. What characteristics do you think you would have to give Chris to make him interesting to yourself?

OK, you're trying to skip the question about characteristics, so now I'm going to stick you with Chris on a broken down bus in the middle of the Rocky Mountains. The driver has gone for help. It's cold and all you have for warmth is a blanket and each other. It's one a.m. and it's just you and Chris having an intimate conversation. What secrets are in his past?

Are his parents divorced? How does he get along with his step parent? Is he abused? Is his grandfather his mentor and best friend? How does he like school? What will he study in college, and what influenced him to go that direction? Who is hot on his list of dates to be? What's the worst thing he has ever done? The best? How does he feel about those things? Who does he really admire, and why?

Is your friend mean and vindictive at times? What made him that way? Is he moral? Immoral? Why? What does he really think about God? ... Sex? Has he ever seen a UFO or been possessed? What does your friend really want to happen to him this year? In the next month? Today?

OK, you're being too nice; this guy is coming off like an angel. This is your big chance to live vicariously - run with it. Put some dirt on him, smudge his reputation, give him an attitude. He can flunk out of school (or make straight A's), be on probation with the police (or work for them), hang out with all the wrong people: politicians, lawyers, writers. He can even say irreverent things like that! He can be like you, or not be like you. Make him just unique enough to get attention.

Now that you've created a person, you have to like him. Or hate him. If he doesn't appeal to you for some reason, set him aside as a secondary character and make another. You really do have to care about the character you create. You see, I read a

lot of scripts that spend the first half of the story creating a character. That's how long it took the writer to really get to know his character and that's when he finally began to write. Only by then it was too late for the story.

I also see stories where the writer never did care about his characters. What happens is nothing. The writer walks the paper doll character through the story, making it do this and that because that's what the plot calls for. He manipulates the character to make the story work and finally runs out of energy, so the story falls apart near the end because he never really worked up any interest in it. The reader doesn't care. The movie won't get made.

On the other hand, if you give your characters a past and wants and needs like real people, and care about them, a terrific thing happens. They take on a life of their own and make the story work. That doesn't mean you have to get romantically involved and all slobbery. It just means you should find your characters, and what happens to them, interesting to you from the start.

Put your characters together in a situation. Examples: a non-school competition, cruising at a fast food restaurant, an art show, a tractor pull, work, a trip, the hair stylist - you name it. Before you write much, where were they just prior to this scene and what are your characters going to do the next day? What event will bring each of these people into conflict? You now have all the information for a scene and the basis for a story. Have fun writing it!

Review Questions:

- 1) Good stories often come from:
 - a. Severely disturbed people.
 - b. Overactive imaginations.
 - c. Characters who have been well developed.
- 2) Well developed characters:
 - a. Have a past.
 - b. Have interests.
 - c. Have problems.
 - d. Want something (motivation).
 - e. All of the above.
- 3) Conflict develops when:
 - a. Your character's wants (motivations) conflict with another characters.'

b. An obstacle (some one, some thing, some situation) prevents your character from getting what he wants.

c Both a. and b. are correct.

d. This is a trick question - you didn't fool me!

4) If I like my characters:

a. Others will like them.

b. I will have more interest in them and write a better story.

c. I will fall in love, spend all of my time writing, and end up in a mental hospital.

d. a. and b. are true, while c. usually is not.

Navigation:

You can click the browse buttons >> to go to the next topic (<< to go back)

Click hypertext to go to that topic:

[Quick Start Summary](#)

[Continue to the next topic: The Plot: What Moves Your Story](#)

[Contents](#)



The Plot: What Moves Your Story

The plot is the main plan of your story. It is the engine that drives the story forward on course. It is the hook, or mystery, or engaging *what if* that interests the viewer. The interest grabbing plot of [Prom Date](#) is Shaun's desire to date Laura. His desire for a date and his shyness make him do all the things he does.

The plot extends to include all the things that make the story work. Tim's deceitful ways are part of the plot. Dave's knowledge is part of the plot. Colin is part of the plot.

Plot is the most important part of a screenplay and is an integral part of the story. You can write out the plot, or you can weave the tangled web in your head. But you should know the basic plot.

The easiest way to plot a story is to know two things: What your characters want, and what the situation is. When the characters are put in a situation, they are going to start working to get what they want. For example, if Shaun wants a date for the prom, and Tim wants a date for the prom, and they're both interested in the same girl, what are they going to do? Shaun goes directly for the girl (through Tim), but Tim takes the indirect deceitful route. Complicate things by throwing in some obstacles, like Dave and Colin, and you have a story.

Plotting a story can be a lot of fun. You keep asking yourself, "What would this character do in this situation?" or, What would happen if this happened? And you continue throwing your characters into worse and worse situations until they finally cave in or conquer the problem. It's fun to ask others what they think someone would do. You'll find by discussing it with others you'll get a lot of ideas and write a more believable screenplay. Start getting your ideas on paper as soon as possible. This helps solidify them so they don't drift around in space forever.

Part of the problem with plotting is that once you have planned your story through to the end, you know the ending and the thrill of discovery is finished for you. The way to avoid this is to remember that each scene is a little story in itself, so you have several little stories to write for your screenplay.

Hint: The mad rush to get it written can work in your favor. Instead of writing full scenes, write brief paragraphs about what is going to happen in the scenes or acts, so you get a brief sketch of the entire story on paper. There are always some great

scenes you will want to write right away, so do it. This way the character's motivations can still drive the story, but not get out of control. (I use this method because it's more fun for me, and works well for me. This form of writing is called a treatment, and is used by many writers.) Then the challenge is to make each scene develop into a powerful scene.

Subplot

The subplot is like the plot, but not as important. It intertwines with the plot and helps develop it. In the [Prom Date](#) story, the model airplane contest was a subplot. It made Shaun frustrated in Act I. It got him talking to Dave in Act II. In Act III it was part of the denouement.

Hint: Romance is a very typical subplot.

Review Questions:

- 1) A plot:
 - a. Has something to do with cemeteries.
 - b. Is the main conflict that makes everyone tense.
 - c. Flies airplanes and can't get the wing size right.
 - d. Is b. above, plus everything that makes the story go and twist and turn.
- 2) A subplot:
 - a. Is beneath a casket in the cemetery.
 - b. Is a smaller parallel story that helps the main story develop.
 - c. Sits beside the main plot in an airplane.
 - d. Both a. and c. are correct (this answer deserves a story - write it).
- 3) An easy way to plot is to:
 - a) Know what your characters want.
 - b) Put your characters in a situation.
 - c) Put in a good mystery.
 - d) a and b are correct, and I might have read about c earlier.
- 4) Elements you could use to make your story more interesting are:
 - a) A romance subplot.
 - b) Mystery.
 - c) Discovery.
 - d) Life affirming.

e) These are all true, providing I develop the talent to actually do it.

5) A screenplay outline:

a) Follows a formal numerical format, like these questions.

b) May be brief paragraphs describing scenes and character interaction.

c) May keep me from wasting many hours and getting frustrated and quitting.

d) May include exciting scenes I can't wait to write.

e) Won't be the least bit interesting to other readers.

e) b, c, d and e are correct.

Navigation:

You can click the browse buttons >> to go to the next topic (<< to go back)

Click hypertext to go to that topic:

[Quick Start Summary](#)

[Continue to the next topic: The Scene: Fundamental Building Block](#)

[Contents](#)



The Scene: Fundamental Building Block

If you went home and told a friend today that one of your classmates, Trudy, "Made a scene in the school cafeteria with her boyfriend," your friend would know what you meant. Trudy had an argument with him, or gave him a kiss, or something like that. Whatever happened, it was in a setting: the cafeteria. It involved some bit of drama: an argument or a kiss. It lasted about three minutes before her boyfriend left to cool off. Those are the same things that a screenplay scene are about.

The scene is the fundamental building block of the screenplay. A scene is an unbroken piece of dramatic action that takes place in one setting. In other words, if you change to a different place or time, it's a new scene.

Scenes in modern popular movies last an average of two minutes. They can last from a few seconds to several minutes, if needed. Sometimes scenes just give information, like seeing a shot of a car speeding to get somewhere. But main scenes are like little stories. There is usually some conflict - conflict is the heart of drama. Tension builds until one character changes directions or decides to change things. Usually at least one character will change emotional states during the scene. He enters happy, leaves mad. She enters aloof, leaves touched.

Following are descriptions of three example scenes from [Prom Date](#):

Example 1: Shaun and Tim are leaving the school. Shaun's sister, Elizabeth, passes him with her boyfriend, John, and coyly asks Shaun if he has a date for prom yet, making him feel bad. Dave the Geek walks by and Tim says to Shaun, "At least we're not Geeks. Geeks never get a date." Laura comes toward them with a car full of girls. Shaun says, "I wish I could get a date with Laura." Laura waves to Dave. Shaun's and Tim's eyes bulge. Shaun drops his books onto the sidewalk and dismally trudges across the grass toward the gym.

Example 2: Following the preceding scene: Shaun enters and sits alone on the bleachers watching basketball practice. One player throws him a ball and asks, "Did you get back on the team?" Shaun answers, "I can't - grades are too low." Discouraged, Shaun hands the ball back and leaves.

Note in the preceding scenes that Shaun changed emotional states: wistful to dismal. Shaun changed direction, from wanting to date Laura to despair (but not intensely).

There was conflict which built tension: Shaun expressed his desire for a date with Laura, which was increased by seeing Laura wave to Dave. See if you can identify the conflicts, rising tension, and changing emotional states, and changes in direction in the following example.

Example 3: Shaun arrives at Laura's house for the first time, ready to impress her with hard to get tickets to a concert and to ask her for a date. He quickly pulls on a sweater as he leaves his car. Laura opens the door and smiles at him. He smiles at her, then sees over her shoulder. Dave rises from a table, waves, and goes to another room. Shaun is lost for words and Laura stares at him expectantly, finally saying, "Did you want something?" Dave comes to the door and says, "Shaun, you have your sweater on wrong side out." He looks down at it, sees the binding, and lies, "No... It's... meant to be this way." Dave smiles at him and says, "Now we know why you do so poorly in geometry. You don't know the inside of a circle from the outside. Dave and Laura laugh. Laura asks, "Do you want to come in?" Shaun replies, "I, uh, no..." He backs away, stumbling down the first step, and steps into a flower box, his arms flailing in all directions. "Some other time." He quickly leaves as Dave and Laura collapse with laughter.

Review Questions:

- 1) Drama, or dramatic action, is the result of:
 - a. Conflict.
 - b. Conflicting character actions.
 - c. Conflicting situations.
 - d. A kiss. A kiss is just a kiss, but it can sure create a scene. Whew!
 - e. Um... I like them all.
- 2) Gripping stories must have (I'm sure you want it to be *gripping*):
 - a. Conflict, which produces tension.
 - b. More of the above to make it really captivate people.
 - c. All of the above.
- 3) Conflict is:
 - a. When you argue with your brother over chewing gum.
 - b. When your character wants something, and it is out of reach.
 - c. When the good guy wants something, and the bad guy won't let him have it.
 - d. When the bad guy wants something, and the good guy won't let him have it.

e. Yes to all of them.

Navigation:

You can click the browse buttons >> to go to the next topic (<< to go back)

Click hypertext to go to that topic:

[Quick Start Summary](#)

[Continue to the next topic: Dialogue: Writing What People Say](#)

[Contents](#)



Dialogue: Writing What People Say

In real life, I'm not a person who does much small talk and I'm kind of quiet, unless I'm leading a seminar. But I make a lot of noise on paper. In fact, my dialogue tends to run on and on. Many people have the opposite problem, they talk a lot, but find dialogue difficult to write. Whether people find it difficult or easy, their dialogue usually needs a lot of polishing.

Dialogue is the words that people say. There is no place for a *he said*, or *she felt*, just the words. Example:

ELIZABETH
Thanks a lot, dweeb!

You might clarify Elizabeth's emotions with a dialogue instruction if there is a compelling reason. For example, Elizabeth understands why her boyfriend, John, made her angry: he was having problems at home.

ELIZABETH
(Compassionately)
Thanks a lot, dweeb.

Good stories with good dialogue will leave little doubt as to the meaning and will not need *compassionately*, but use enough dialogue instructions to make it clear.

Dialogue should be as short, or *crisp*, as possible. The standard dialogue line is three inches long. Three of those lines is about as long as will play well. When it is longer, it needs to be focused, broken up, or polished.

Trying to say too many things at one time is a common problem. Make the line say just one thing, or respond to the previous line and say something new. Take the following poor dialogue for example:

JOHN
I've been looking all over for you. Where were you today? I've looked up and down the hall and in all the classes. I couldn't figure it out! What do you want to do after class? I'm going to the frog races, do you want to come?

ELIZABETH

I've been around - you know me, I'm lost half the time. Sorry you missed me. I don't know what I want to do after class. Frog races! I may be out of my mind, but I'm not crazy. No, let's do something else.

Elizabeth responded to each of John's questions, but I doubt that even John could understand.

Compare to this:

JOHN

Where were you today?

ELIZABETH

How should I know? I just inhabit this body. I skipped out again.

JOHN

Not again! I was afraid of that. I've been looking all over for you.

ELIZABETH

I'm so sorry, John. It's sweet of you to look out for me.

JOHN

I'm going to the frog races after class. Want to come?

ELIZABETH

Frog races! Just because my mind is gone, that doesn't mean I'm crazy.

JOHN

Then can I give you a lift home?

(CONTINUED)

Elizabeth staggers across the sidewalk and looks faint. John holds her steady.

JOHN (CONT)

Yes, I will take you home.

When dialogue lines are interrupted by a scene instruction line, or continued on the next page, then (CONTINUED) is often written at the break in the dialogue and by the

character name where it resumes. For masterscene scripts this convention is fading away, so you dont have to use it.

Review Question:

1) Dialogue should:

- a) Talk about next weeks date, hobbies, and what's new on TV.
- b) Be as brief as possible and focus on what the character wants.
- c) Be three inches long, and usually not over three lines.
- d) Reply to previous dialogue and say something new.
- e) b. and c and d.

Navigation:

You can click the browse buttons >> to go to the next topic (<< to go back)

Click hypertext to go to that topic:

[Quick Start Summary](#)

[Continue to the next topic: Set-ups For Short Scripts](#)

[Contents](#)

NAVIGATION



Start Notepad

Info

Set-ups For Short Scripts

Ten-to-twenty-minute short stories don't have time to give character histories, introduce many characters, make elaborate plot setups, or do much unwinding at the end. They have few characters, simple and direct plots, and no unwinding.

The synopsis for [Prom Date](#), a thirty-minute story, is too long for a ten page story. If you write a similar story, launch right into the problem with Shaun having Tim ask Laura for a date for Shaun. Tim lies to Laura about Shaun, and asks for a date himself. He lies to Shaun, saying she already has a date. Shaun needs to talk to Dave the Geek about a math problem. Dave is also Laura's tutor and he tells Shaun that Laura actually likes him, but she is going to the prom with Tim because he asked first. Shaun immediately wants to fight Tim, but Dave tells him not to act like Tim, but to talk to Laura like a real person, and just refute the lies. If Laura wants to go with him, she has reason enough to dump Tim. Shaun realizes Dave is really a nice guy. He overcomes his shyness and convinces Laura that Tim told her lies, and gets the prom date.

For short scripts, choose less complicated problems. Use no more main characters than necessary. Know exactly what the story is about and don't sidetrack. For example, this short version is about overcoming shyness and what can happen if shyness prevents you from taking responsibility for your life. Any subplot should be very integrated with the main plot so it doesn't take time to develop by itself. The main subplot is that Shaun's communicating with Dave brought understanding of Dave and opened up an entire new world of friendship and benefits. The second subplot, which is undeveloped in the above short synopsis, is Tim's bitter lesson of losing his best friend because of his selfish actions. The shorter the story, the fewer the obstacles and complications that should arise.

Navigation:

You can click the browse buttons >> to go to the next topic (<< to go back)

Click hypertext to go to that topic:

[Quick Start Summary](#)

[Continue to the next topic: Characters For Short Scripts](#)

[Contents](#)

NAVIGATION



Start Notepad

Info

Characters For Short Scripts

If you meet a man at a bus stop, say hello and part, you learn very little about him. He could be an ax-murderer or a billionaire, or both. The same can happen in a short script, so it is essential to turn up the focus on the characters. There are several ways to do that.

First, make sure the audience feels strongly about the characters. The good guy should be likable, the bad guy gut wrenching. For example, the first thing the bad guy might do is get angry and abuse something. Beyond that, the audience should feel for the situation. They might pity the good guy in his plight or admire him for facing danger, or feel outrage at the bad guy.

The character should have one, or at the most two, strong character traits. He might be very smart, but have no street smarts. Very perceptive. Very pushy. Very lazy. Very dishonest. [Hint](#): bring strong traits out in subtle ways. Instead of the smart guy showing everyone up by answering a difficult question, let him give the answer later.

Whatever it is the character wants (his motivation) should be the main thing on his mind, if not the only thing, from page one to page last. For example, if Julie loses her mother's very expensive ring and really wants to find it before her parents get home from their trip, she won't be distracted by requests for dates, visits to her grandparents, and watching television all day. However, something on equal par, like the risk of losing a previously scheduled date with her dream-boat of two years, might be an interesting complication, especially if he becomes the key to finding the lost ring.

The characters should surround themselves with symbols of their character. The power executive might dress in a pin stripe suit, wing-tip shoes, power tie, and carry a thin leather briefcase with a portable phone inside. He jets to the islands for the weekend, has club memberships, serves on committees. He drives a BMW with a Fax machine. He has a large house inside a burb with a privacy wall, an exercise machine in one room, a dog who bites him, and a kid he calls by the wrong name. Down the street lives a poor seven-year-old boy in a two-bed apartment, with a dog named Bones, and Aunt Carey, who would do anything for him. He dresses in distressed blue jeans, clean pull over shirts and sneakers. In a vacant lot he has a Head Hunter's club that collects dead animal skulls and doll heads, which are used primarily to frighten away girls.

Navigation:

You can click the browse buttons >> to go to the next topic (<< to go back)

Click hypertext to go to that topic:

[Quick Start Summary](#)

[Continue to the next topic: Format](#)

[Contents](#)



Format

Why bother with format? Suppose you were a film executive and you liked two stories equally well, but had to choose only one. Shooting a film costs several thousand dollars a minute, sometimes close to a million. When you looked at one script, you weren't able to tell how long it was, how many scenes were to be filmed outside at locations requiring expensive transportation, or how many scenes were to be filmed at night, keeping expensive actors and film crews up all night. The writer hadn't bothered to put it in the correct format, and who knows what else he might have neglected. Which one would you choose? An example scene from [Prom Date](#) follows the technical specifications, to illustrate proper format.

Screenplay Script Technical Specifications:

Typewritten. 1-1/2 inch left margin. 1 inch top, right, and bottom margins

Binding: Preferred - Three hole bound with brass brads. No cover, or plain cover with title and writer's name.

Title page: Title mid-page. Writer's name mid-page. Name, address and phone at lower left corner.

No cast page, or scene layouts, or other pages.

Dates and draft numbers are not recommended. A WGA number is common, and is typically used in place of a copyright notice (which is dated). Scripts must be registered, for a fee, with the Writer's Guild to obtain a WGA number.

First story page: No title or writer's name on this or following script pages. A running heading is acceptable but not common.

Types of scripts

You may hear of several types of scripts. Although there are representative styles of scripts, there is no standard script format. The following format information is based on commonly accepted conventions.

Masterscene Script: Scene by scene presentation of the drama. This is the form usually used for initial readings, and ***the format used for this guide.***

Shooting Script: A very technical script listing the camera shots to be used during filming. Shooting scripts are prepared by directors, or other experienced professionals, from masterscene scripts. *This form is not used with this guide.*

Teleplay Script: Television script. *This form is not used with this guide.* But for information, TV shows specify the type format they use. They often use a format that resembles an audio/visual script with dialogue on one side of the page and camera and technical directions on the other. They also often use the scripts typically used by the film industry. Drama, sitcoms, soaps, and TV movies all use different formats. A guide such as *The Writer's Digest Guide to Manuscript Formats* gives representative samples. Scripts for TV only need to follow a special format when submitted to a specific show, and it would be necessary to write the producer for specific instructions.

DON'T SEND SCRIPTS or more than a sentence of information about a story to the film or TV industry - they will only be refused.

Slug line

Scenes are always preceded by a slug line that tells whether the scene is inside or out, the location, and whether it is day or night. Examine the following slug line and see if you can easily write one yourself:

INT. JOHNNY'S APARTMENT - DAY

INT. = Interior EXT. = Exterior

Scene Description Lines

The slug line is followed immediately by scene description lines. These tell more about the setting, who is in the scene, and sometimes where they are located and what they are doing. Important instructions are placed here.

Scene instruction lines occur throughout the scene as needed. They often instruct about essential character actions, such as shooting another character.

Characters sometimes talk when they aren't within camera range, or are on the phone, radio, etc. When this happens, you write the character name and dialogue as usual, but next to the character name write (O.S.) when they are off screen, or (V.O.) when the voice is dubbed or reproduced (voice over).

Two other conventions: Everything is written in present tense - don't put *ed* on the end of words. Put a character's name in ALL CAPITALS in the scene description lines the first time the character appears in the script.

Terms

Only one technical term is needed in Masterscene scripts: DISSOLVE.

Scene changes: In modern film, scenes change abruptly from one to the next. This is termed CUT TO, and is *unnecessary* to write in the script unless there is some risk of confusion. To show that time has elapsed, DISSOLVE is used. This means the ending scene, or shot, fades out while the next fades in. When needed, DISSOLVE should be written at the right margin:

DISSOLVE

FADE IN can be written at the beginning of the script. FADE OUT at the end. Both terms are *unnecessary*. If you need to fade to black, write FADE OUT at the right margin.

Shots tell the director what the camera is pointed at. Don't use the word camera in a script, always use SHOT. Specifying shots and other technical things interferes with reading the story. Avoid using shots if at all possible. The writer's job is to tell the story in words. The director's job is to tell it cinematically. He will decide what shots are necessary. For example, if Elizabeth sees a bug inside her milk glass, just write: Elizabeth sees a bug inside her milk glass. She makes a face. The director will decide what shots to use to show that.

The following example scene from *Prom Date* illustrates the proper format to use.

EXT. CROWN HILL HIGH SCHOOL - DAY (**slug line**)

SHAUN and TIM are walking away from the school carrying books. RYAN is about to leave in a funny car. Shaun is ignoring his sister, ELIZABETH, who is approaching with her boyfriend, JOHN. (**Scene description lines**)

SQUEALING TIRES (**Sound effects line**)

All the students hug the inside edge of the sidewalk or take to the grass. Tim steps on Shaun's sister, Elizabeth, who is walking by. The cars on the street clear a wide path for Ryan. (**Scene instruction lines**)

HORNS HONKING, POLICE SIREN

ELIZABETH

(Smug.) (Dialogue direction line)
Shaun, do you have a date for prom? (Dialogue line)

Shaun and Tim ignore Elizabeth and walk on. DAVE walks by them toward the parking lot.

DAVE
Hi, guys.

SHAUN
Hail, Dave.

TIM
(Under breath)
King of Geeks.

LAURA exits the parking lot with a CAR LOAD OF GIRLS. Shaun and Tim watch as the car approaches.

SHAUN
What wouldn't I give for a prom date
with Laura?

TIM
Give your brain, you won't lose much.

SHAUN
At least we're not geeks. Geeks never
get dates.

Laura and Dave the Geek exchange waves. Shaun and Tim stand on the sidewalk with their eyes bulging. Shaun drops his books on the sidewalk then trudges toward the gym.

Navigation:

You can click the browse buttons >> to go to the next topic (<< to go back)

Click hypertext to go to that topic:

[*Quick Start Summary*](#)

[Continue to the next topic: *Rewriting: The Best Kept Secret In Hollywood*](#)

[Contents](#)



Rewriting: The Best Kept Secret In Hollywood

The pros say the secret to effective screenwriting is rewriting to make the story do exactly what you want it to. If something doesn't work, I don't hesitate to change it. I get feedback from others, then rewrite. Rewriting can seem boring, but if you think of it as crafting a fine story and making it do what you want, then it is more fun. Following are tips for rewriting:

1) The story seems weak - no pizzazz.

- What does your main character have to lose? If the stakes are too low, there will be very little interest.
- Is this a rehash of some plot we already know? Add new problems. Find different solutions.

2) The story wanders.

- What does your main character want? Remove the scenes, dialogue, events and actions that stray from reaching that goal.
- Are the subplots taking over the story? Too many characters with too many motivations will take the story in too many directions.

3) A character doesn't act consistently the same through the story.

- What does the character want? He should be trying to achieve that.
- Are his motives too hidden? Show what they are.

4) The plot seems hard to believe.

- Did you make real characters and put them in a real setting? Or did you make up the characters and setting as you went along, conveniently adding whatever worked? Real characters work in real settings. Remake your characters and setting with real limitations.
- Are your characters responding like real people might do, or are they just doing imaginative things? Make your characters stay within a normal realm of behavior, unless you're writing fantasy.

5) The story is like the pages of my friend's life - it goes everywhere but nowhere.

Real life anecdotes are difficult to work into a story, and stories that use them usually play like a series of unconnected stories, and no one wants to bend the facts to fit the story. If something that happened in real life fits with your character's motivation, use it. If not, throw it out.

6) The main character wins every battle very easily. It's boring.

The good guy and bad guy (or conflicting situation) should be equally matched.

7) People like the lesser characters better than the protagonist.

A lesser character often steals the show. Either limit his role, or give his characteristics to the main character.

8) The main character ends the story just like he began it - same person, same problems.

The main character should change as a result of the story. He becomes stronger, wiser, discovers inner resources, becomes better at handling problems, or acquires new abilities.

9) The dialogue is boring and it goes nowhere.

- Dialogue results from the conflict when two characters are trying to reach different goals. What do the characters want?
- Giving information makes bad dialogue. Use conflict situations to give information. If it isn't important to the character, then he doesn't need it.
- Focus on what the story is about. If it isn't important to the story, don't say it. For example, introductions, entering the scene, making plans - all can be kept very short.

10) The dialogue and scenes go on forever.

Less is more. The shorter things are, the more pointed they are.

11) Over half the script is already taken up with character history and explaining motivation.

Screenplays are not like novels. The first pages need to be filled with dramatic action, not character history. Older screenplays commonly began like a novel, but that is less acceptable with today's audiences. Characterization is shown through the character's behavior (words or actions). Set the pages aside as a character sketch and begin again, drawing on action from the pages you set aside. It isn't wasted.

Navigation:

You can click the browse buttons >> to go to the next topic (<< to go back)

Click hypertext to go to that topic:

[Quick Start Summary](#)

BEWARE! THINGS THAT BRING BAD RESULTS

[Contents](#)

Beware! Things That Bring Bad Results:

NAVIGATION



Start Notepad

Info

Beware! Things That Bring Bad Results:

Don't have one character tell another what he should do, especially through an authority figure. The character should find his own solutions.

Don't use acts of God and events that come out of nowhere. The characters should make their own solutions, not some outside force. For example, Johnny's need for money shouldn't suddenly be resolved by winning the lottery, or the death of a rich uncle.

Don't have a character say what the story is about or what the moral message of it is. These things should be obvious by the character's actions. That doesn't mean a character doesn't listen to an inner voice, but his motivations should be clear and solutions should be caused by him.

Don't repeatedly set up a problem in one scene and resolve it in the next. That rhythm loses viewer interest.

Don't give people special powers. Even the science fiction series *Star Trek*, with its cast of aliens, is about real people facing real life problems in unusual conditions, and the powers the aliens have is very limited. The exception is fantasy stories.

Don't use excessive foul language, sex, and violence. Movies that use these, especially when they are not necessary to the story, are not well received in the film industry. Movies that demean people, or feature gratuitous mistreatment of people or animals, are typically ignored by film industry readers, which prevents them from getting to producers and directors.

Don't number the scenes.

Don't use technical terms or specify camera shots or angles. No one will notice their absence, but their presence is disruptive and often amateurish or erroneous.

Don't give stage directions to the actor unless it is necessary for clarity. The actors' and directors' jobs are to thoroughly analyze a script and plan every word and move. They will decide how to act the play. But keep in mind that the script is first read by others and giving some idea of what you had in mind is often needed for clarity. They can mark it out later.

Don't indicate how the actor got from one scene to the next or what he did in the mean

time unless it helps the story. If he is there, we'll know he got there by some customary means and assume he probably didn't materialize. If he was traveling over lunch time, we'll assume he had sense enough to stop and eat. Coming, going, and eating are not what make a story.

Don't spell the action out in great detail in action scenes (scenes with a lot of movement). Give highlights of chase scenes or fights, not blow-by-blow descriptions.

Don't write the way people actually speak. People meander, repeat, change subjects, get verbose and obtuse, but none of these help a script. Scripts need to be as direct as possible without losing the essence of the character or losing the drama.

Don't use quotation marks or *he said, she said, or she felt...* in dialogue. Dialogue must stand on its own.

Don't use slang words or phrases and foul language. They tend to date your script and obscure the meaning of the dialogue. Movies aren't reality, and excessive realism detracts from instead of enhancing movies.

Don't use flashbacks, if possible. Flashbacks work poorly in film and usually slow the action. When a story is moving backward, it isn't going forward.

Navigation:

You can click the browse buttons >> to go to the next topic (<< to go back)

Click hypertext to go to that topic:

[Quick Start Summary](#)

[Continue to the next topic: HELPFUL THINGS](#)

[Contents](#)

HELPFUL THINGS



Stolen Property Statement - Please Read!

Written works, such as movie scripts, novels, and treatments are subject to copyright law. Copying portions of others' work is plagiarism, and is illegal. But ideas and titles are not subject to copyright law. In other words, if you write a story it is subject to copyright law, but if you tell someone the outline of your story (which is basically ideas) it probably would not be subject to copyright law.

Writers Workshop, myself, and most of the film industry has high respect for other's creative properties - indeed, live in fear of law suits and normally won't even hear an idea or see a script except through an agent and with a release form. The Writers Workshop program provides a unique opportunity for a large number of scripts to be read, evaluated, and recognized. With the safeguards provided by the Writer's Guild, copyright law, and the legal climate, the risk of plagiarism is extremely limited. However, the film industry is an idea industry. Once an idea is made public, it is public property. (But even ideas are respected in the business and are purchased when offered through legitimate channels.)

There are literally many thousands of people writing scripts and submitting them each year, but less than 400 films are made each year, plus TV episodes. There are only so many basic plots possible (around 36). The variations are in the full story line: subplots, characters and situations. A writer's skill is not so much in forming the basic plot, but in creating characters, a story line, and fleshing it out. It is very likely that writers will see something similar to their basic plot on TV within the next one to three years, or even a similar story line, especially if the topic is hot, or very universal. This doesn't mean their script has been plagiarized, or indicate a lack of creative talent in Hollywood, or even that someone stole their basic idea. It simply indicates the reality of the creative world. Great minds think alike.

If you believe actual plagiarism has occurred within the film industry, you can contact a lawyer or the Writer's Guild for sound advice on how to proceed to rectify the situation. East of the Mississippi River, contact Writer's Guild of America, East, Inc. 555 West 57th. Street, New York, NY 10019-2967. West of the Mississippi, contact Writer's Guild of America, West, Inc. 8955 Beverly Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90048. The Writer's Guild is a bargaining agency for members with produced screenplays, but can provide limited information to non-members.

Navigation:

You can click the browse buttons >> to go to the next topic (<< to go back)

Click hypertext to go to that topic:

[Quick Start Summary](#)

[Continue to the next topic: Teacher's Information](#)

[Contents](#)

NAVIGATION



Teacher's Information

This guide is not intended as a textbook. No attempt has been made to use precise definitions of terms or to teach theory of literature or creative writing. It is intended only as a practical aid to help people write a screenplay, and may be found a useful resource for conventional curriculums.

This guide emphasizes an intuitive rather than analytical approach. Concepts in this guide are presented in an order that will get people writing and interested enough to dig deeper. Characterization, dramatic structure (especially plot), dialogue, the scene, and format are essential to writing a screenplay. The remainder is improving on the basics.

The phrase, *what this story is about*, is often substituted for *concept, plot, theme, and premise*. *Concept* is an excellent tool for focusing dramatic structure. *Theme* and *premise* can be useful tools, but are less often used, even though they are evident in stories. *Plot* is the most useful tool and has been explained in some depth.

Contemporary wisdom has it that characterization is the essential starting point for a screenplay and that story follows from character. However, many writers need some idea of what their story is about before they can even begin developing characters. For example, as people confront questions in their life they often choose to write about them. Characters become a device for exploration. This idea is central to the Writers Workshop pilot program with high schools, giving students both the motivation to write, and an avenue of exploration. Writing is an interactive process and there is no one best starting point for all stories. Building characters is an excellent beginning exercise from which stories can develop and exploration can blossom.

I recommend workshopping one (30 minute) screenplay in class as an excellent vehicle for gaining interest, participation, and learning. The workshopping approach allows writers to both write the story and see the result through staged reading.

I hope you or one of your students will write the next *Home Alone!* Please be aware that ALL scripts submitted to anyone associated with the TV and movie industry must be submitted through an agent with a Release Form (provided by a studio). The Writer's Guild can supply you with a list of agents, particularly those willing to take new clients. A query letter to a receptive agent will get you a Release Form. Good luck!

Navigation:

You can click the browse buttons >> to go to the next topic (<< to go back)

Click hypertext to go to that topic:

[Quick Start Summary](#)

[Continue to the next topic: Resources](#)

[Contents](#)



Resources

The script for the mega-hit Home Alone has been made available by the studio for use with classes through National Writers Workshop (address below).

Screenplay staged reading techniques developed by Willard Rodgers (which vary considerably from plays), and extensive additional information on screenwriting is available in my book, [Writers Workshop Script Doctor](#), available through National Writers Workshop, or directly by Internet e-mail.

Your local library and bookstores will likely have books by popular authors, such as: Lajos Egri, Eugene Vale, Syd Field, Linda Seger, Linda Stuart, Cynthia Whitcomb, and many other writes, which cover various aspects of screenwriting.

Additional printed copies of *How To Write A Screenplay* are available free from National Writers Workshop. The electronic version is available free by downloading the file from the BBS, Internet, or online service from which this copy was obtained. Or by Internet e-mail from DaScotWrit@aol.com.

Also available: [Writers Workshop Script Doctor](#). Find structural problems in screenplay scripts, learn how to fix them and where to get help. Add professional touches to your script using visual writing techniques. A percentage of the royalty goes to National Writers Workshop. National Writers Workshop is a non-profit organization and depends on revenue and sponsor donations to operate its writer assistance programs.

Contact National Writers Workshop by mail at PO Box 69799, Los Angeles, CA, 90069, or by phone at 213-933-9232. Willard Rodgers, Director.

Navigation:

You can click the browse buttons >> to go to the next topic (<< to go back)

Click hypertext to go to that topic:

[Quick Start Summary](#)

[Continue to the next topic: About](#)

[Contents](#)



About

How To Write A Screenplay
By Dorian Scott Cole

Copyright Dorian Scott Cole, 1994. All rights reserved, including rights to use any portion in future publications. Non-exclusive printing and distribution rights: National Writers Workshop, PO Box 69799, Los Angeles, CA 90069. Electronic version made available in April, 1996, all rights reserved.

VisualWord is a trademark of VisualWord Co.

Copying: School systems may copy this guide electronically or in print as needed for classroom use by including copyright information. No part of this guide may be used in another document or altered without expressed permission from the author. All rights are reserved - this is not public domain material.

Printing: The "help file" format allows printing of topics. A topic includes the information identified by major headings that is visible on the screen or by using the scroll bar, but does not require "jumping" to another topic.

Intent: Funds for printing the original document were provided to National Writers Workshop by THE ACADEMY OF MOTION PICTURE ARTS AND SCIENCES, partly because of the nonprofit nature of National Writers Workshop and its assistance to screenwriters. The Academy does not endorse (or not endorse) this guide or contribute financially in any other way. The author was not (and is not) compensated in any way for this guide. This electronic book version is made available without charge in Microsoft Windows for PC format in that same spirit, and additional material has been added. Although this version is also used as an advertising vehicle for *Writers Workshop Script Doctor*, nothing has been deleted from the original, and nothing was withheld at any time to diminish the value or effectiveness of the Guide in any version (for example to promote marketing). This guide in print or electronic form really is a unrestricted freebie.

Versions: This document will be available at a later date in HTML (Web page style) format (principally for use on single computers - not on the WEB).

Regarding Macintosh platforms: Current Macs support PC programs. Because of cost, support for older Mac and other computer platforms is not planned for existing or future versions. Queries are welcome in case a Mac version fortuitously comes available.

Graphics: Graphics in this electronic book are the exclusive design of Dorian Scott Cole, except the movie and reel pictures in the opening graphics, which are Microsoft Clipart. Exclusive graphics in this document are covered under the document copyright.

History: How To Write A Screenplay was written in 1994/5 for [National Writers Workshop](#) for its pilot program with Los Angeles, Hollywood, and surrounding city high schools. National Writers Workshop is a nonprofit organization whose purpose is to find, assist, and develop new screenwriters (with a strong focus on minorities), and has been supported by major motion picture studios, organizations, prominent individuals, and volunteers since 1979. The pilot program was designed as a way of encouraging writing in the school system, and of providing an avenue of assistance into screenwriting. This guide is designed as an addition to existing curriculums where screenwriting can be an elective, and not as a course in itself. See [Teacher's Information](#) for more information. Topics are based on the Author's original research, screenplay critiques, and book [Writers Workshop Script Doctor](#).

Contact: For permissions, feedback, and questions, contact Dorian Scott Cole by the Internet e-mail address, scole@visualword.com (Nov. 96), or by mail through National Writers Workshop, PO Box 69799, Los Angeles, CA 90069. **Do not send scripts or story ideas** - I can't read them because of time limitations and plagiarism issues. At the first hint of story content I will have to delete the entire message (sorry).

Navigation:

You can click the browse buttons >> to go to the next topic (<< to go back)

Click hypertext to go to that topic:

[Quick Start Summary](#)

[Continue to the next topic: Writers Workshop Script Doctor](#)

[Contents](#)



WRITERS WORKSHOP SCRIPT DOCTOR

Copyright 1994, Dorian Scott Cole

Identify problems that keep your screenplay off the producer's desk, and learn how to fix them.

What do you do with a screenplay that doesn't sell? One you have invested a lot of yourself in, with a potential value of forty thousand or more. Keep shuffling it around to agents and contests? Park it on the top shelf of a closet? Read yet another book telling the same old things? **Finally a book that tells everything - how to identify problems and quickly fix them, as well as in depth help. A true writer's tool kit!**

The Top Twenty Problems and their remedies

Almost all writers have problems with characterization and structure. Thirteen major categories are explored, with myriad problems described and solutions given. Scenes and dialogue complete the problems sections with seven more major categories.

Plus, discover how to create vibrant characters that come to life on the page in the section *Raising Dead Characters*. Decide when and how to make major turning points in your story with the help of *Five Power Points In Three Act Drama*.

Each section contains the category **Originality**. With this book, you can't help but create original characters, plots, and scenes. And it's loaded with examples!

It's cross referenced and fully indexed to help you find in depth help quickly.

Not just quick solutions to problems.

What motivates characters? Part Two describes motivation from macrocosmic to microcosmic, and the process of character change is explored in detail. Then in an interactive section, use character motivation to form both characters and plot.

Writer's block? Ideas stale? Challenge stodgy thinking out of its rut with Part Two. And explore your choices: How do you pick a genre? What does a concept do for you? Should stories always grow out of character? Where do you draw the line on realism? What is **visual writing**? It may not be what you think!

Find help, and learn about Writers Workshop.

Learn how to critique. Find out how to get into a writers' group, how to workshop scenes, use feedback forms for friends, and of course, learn about the Writers Workshop feedback and script development process. Also learn how to stage a

screenplay using the Rodgers' Technique.

To order the electronic version of *Writers Workshop Script Doctor*, send an Internet e-mail message to scole@visualword.com for mailing instructions. The price is \$10.00, plus 6% sales tax = \$10.60 (US). A percentage of the profit (higher for the electronic version than the printed) will be contributed to National Writers Workshop to assist other screenwriters.

To order the printed version, use the convenient order form below. Use the print menu for this program to print out this page. Send \$16.95 for the print version, or \$10.00 for the electronic version, or \$19.95 for the set of the print and electronic version, plus \$2.00 shipping and handling, to VisualWord, 2613 Suzanne Lane, Acworth, GA, 30102-2213. A percentage of the royalties on this book support National Writers Workshop, a non-profit organization. *Makes a great gift!* Order today.

Writers Workshop Script Doctor order form. (Print clearly - this is your shipping label)

Name .
Address .
_____.
_____.
_____.

Allow four weeks for delivery.

Prices subject to change without notice. Visit <http://www.visualword.com> on the Internet for current price and ordering information.

No cash or COD orders. MasterCard, VISA, American Express, check, or money order.

Print: Qty. ___ at \$16.95 ea.	Total	.
Electronic disk: Qty. ___ at \$10.00 ea.	Total	.
Set: Qty. at \$19.95 ea.	Total	.
	Semi-Total	.
5% Sales Tax (if you live in Georgia)	<u>Total</u>	.
Shipping: Qty. ___ at \$2.00 ea. book	<u>Total</u>	.
	<u>Grand Total</u>	<u>Disks: \$2.00 for any quantity</u>

(Enclose with order)

Navigation:

You can click the browse buttons >> to go to the next topic (<< to go back)

Click hypertext to go to that topic:

[Quick Start Summary](#)

[Continue to the next topic: The Writers Workshop Process](#)

[Contents](#)

NAVIGATION



Start Notepad

Info

The Writers Workshop Process

Writers Workshop was begun in 1979 by Willard Rodgers as an outreach program of the American Film Institute Alumni Association. National Writers Workshop, a nonprofit organization, offers three services to writers. Writing aids are available to help the writer improve. Screenplays are read and critiqued. Screenplays that have reached a significant benchmark in writing, and have potential, are put into the development process, which can lead to a staged reading and even representation (by independent agents).

The Workshop's Critique And Development Process, described by Willard Rodgers, Director

Anyone can submit a screenplay and we will give them a detailed written critique for \$65.00 (subject to change). A \$500.00 reward (subject to change) is given for each script accepted into the development program, and the critique fee is waived. We're always conscious of our credibility with the motion picture business and are constantly striving to develop it even further. We want the best screenplays and new writers in the nation to be submitted to this program, and those screenplays that are accepted must be special scripts. We develop them and present them at our readings, which are called special events, where we have a panel of moderators from the business come and critique the screenplay. When we say special event, people know they're going to see something special.

When a script is submitted, it is entered into the computer and we make sure we have accurate information. Second, we go through our list of readers - a volunteer staff of readers who are located across the US - and call one to see if they are available to read it. We then send it out, requesting a detailed written critique. We insist the readers be constructive and detailed. It certainly doesn't do any good to come back and pound on a writer. Screenplays are very difficult to write and there is no room for personal attacks. We've had a lot of luck with that - we've established the atmosphere so it rarely happens.

When the critique comes back, I read it very carefully to see how constructive and detailed it is and how helpful it will be to the writer. If it's obvious the script is not ready for development, I won't read the script and will return it to the writer. If the screenplay shows promise, I will read it and if I feel it is very strong, I will ask one or two other people to read it and get their opinion. And based on that input, I'll determine if a script should be entered into the development process.

If not selected, I'll send it back to the writer with a detailed critique. Sometimes we may need two or three critiques to determine if a script should be accepted into development. All those critiques are sent to the writer. If everyone likes it, we accept the script. We will send the writer several detailed critiques to try and improve it as much as possible.

The writer rewrites the script, then sends it back to us. I read the script and if I feel it is ready to go out to the industry, I will circulate it. We almost always send them out. We send it to twenty to twenty-five agencies with whom we have long relationships, and whom we know want to see these scripts. They will either call or send us back a letter saying they are not interested. If they are interested, one of two things may happen. They may say they don't want to make the movie but would like to meet the writer and see other samples of the writer's work. At this time we will call the writer and arrange an interview. Or if there is interest in purchasing or optioning a script, I will advise them to get an agent. If they don't know anyone, I will get them an agent to handle the negotiations. At this point, we drop out of it. In several cases the writer was hired as a staff writer. We will push the script as long as it is feasible to do so.

The development process is absolutely not limited to L.A. writers. They enter through our regular program and through contests. No other screenwriting contest in the US will put as many scripts a year into development. We need a lot of scripts to find those special scripts. We also help all the other writers who are not selected by sending them a very detailed written critique on how to improve it, and maybe next time when they submit it again their script will be accepted.

Things that would keep the script out of development are lack of character development, lack of story focus, lack of uniqueness, lack of surprises. Story focus and character development are the main two. If we see potential in a well developed script, we're happy to improve it further.

But we're not here just to find top scripts - that's a benefit of our program - we're here to help all writers at all stages of their development, and find and nurture new talent. There are people out there who have the potential to write great movies if they can only be given a boost. We have a national screenwriting contest for ethnic minorities in which we award five winners. Our goal is to develop ten quality scripts a year: five from the ethnic minority contest, and five or six from our regular program.

We're starting a brand new innovative program: a contest for middle and high school students. I hope to encourage teachers and principals to make this a part of their regular creative writing curriculum. Screenwriting has never been used, and every kid knows about it from TV and movies - it should be used in the schools to encourage writing. There is no guidebook on how to write a screenplay at the level of the high school student, so we have developed a booklet on how to write a screenplay (this one)

that is geared toward high school students. I hope it becomes one of the most favorite student choices in writing classes. We'll get students introduced and interested in screen writing at an early age, which no one does at this point.

We offer a unique opportunity for writers. We're open to anyone regardless of the stage of their screenplay development. We instruct them on things they are unfamiliar with, or weak, including format and structure. I take an active public role in promoting the program, getting out meeting people in higher places we can use to field the program, talking to writers, enhancing our reputation. There is no other nonprofit organization so tied into the industry and so tied into new talent, and we can bring both of these elements together.

And we really are a charitable organization. I have been approached about turning it into a private business, but the charitable, reaching out aspect appeals to me. The biggest satisfaction in my job is changing someone's life in a positive way - this is more important to me than the heads of studios calling. Unlike a studio that necessarily has to be controlled by its bottom line and has limited resources to spend on developing writers, we're not just about money, we are genuinely here to support new writers.

Criteria for reader selection

To select our readers, we request volunteers to send a resume. They must either be screenwriters or people who have a critical background. Based on their resume, we send them one script with our critique forms. When we receive them back I read them very carefully and if their critique is good, we will use them again. Before a critique is sent to a writer, it is scrutinized very carefully to make sure it will be helpful to the writer.

Navigation:

You can click the browse buttons >> to go to the next topic (<< to go back)

Click hypertext to go to that topic:

[Quick Start Summary](#)

[Continue to the next topic: The People At Writers Workshop](#)

[Contents](#)

NAVIGATION



Start Notepad

Info

The People At Writers Workshop

Writers Workshop is people. It isn't a large organization of highly paid professionals with an impersonal job to do. It is an ever changing, relatively small group of volunteers who feel strongly about what they do. Actors like Jennifer Warren, Ron Thompson, Kim Hamilton, and Margaret Fairchild have been members and directors of the Actor's Repertory, which does staged readings of scripts selected for development. Writers like Ford Clay, Jack Guss, David Carren, and Stirling Silliphant have had their scripts read, and have also acted as Moderators.

Moderators have included Robert Blumofe, Ben Benjamin, Richard Brooks, Virginia Carter, Neal Israel, Oliver Stone and Syd Field. Syd, author of several highly successful books on screenwriting, has graciously served as Moderator frequently in recent history. A small army of knowledgeable behind-the-scenes people read the screenplays and write critiques which they hope will be helpful to the writer. The major qualifications for readers are a writing or critical background, plus a proven ability to critique and provide helpful feedback.

Navigation:

You can click the browse buttons >> to go to the next topic (<< to go back)

Click hypertext to go to that topic:

[Quick Start Summary](#)

[Contents](#)

Using Notepad

Notepad is a Microsoft Windows application.

Story ideas may come to you as you read about how to write a screenplay, and you may read things that you want in notes you make about your story. You can make notes in Windows Notepad as you read. You can also copy text and paste it into Notepad. For best results, please note the following:

Notepad may open behind this program, so you can't see it. The normal state for this program is to "stay on top." This is easily resolved. From the Options Menu, Keep Help on Top submenu, deselect Not On Top. Notepad can then be brought to the top by depressing the Alt and Tab key simultaneously and selecting the Notepad application. Icons appear for the programs that are active. While continuing to hold down the Alt key, tab to the Notepad icon and release the keys. Notepad will appear.

For convenience you can change the size of this program and Notepad for best use by dragging the edges of the display areas. You can change the position of either program by clicking on the title bar and dragging the application to the position you want.

Irresistible Stories

Fascinating Characters

What is it that makes a story so gripping you can't stop watching?

What's a world without people? Boringggg! But people facing challenging situations grabs us every time - unless the person is a lump of clay and never rises to the challenge. What makes a story irresistible is people with character. *Character is what it is.*

But how do you make characters that are interesting to others?

Others have to identify with them or be challenged by them. You can do this! See how in the section on Fascinating Characters. Click on the tab.

What to Write

In a world full of rules where everyone is told what to do and how to do it, this is going to surprise you. Cool! Click on the tab.

Making a Scene

Writing a scene is very easy when you think of it in terms of making a scene. Click on the tab. (Hey, don't make a scene, just do it!)

Beware

Gulp! Bad things here. Click on the tab.

Spellbinding Plots

Exciting Acts

What's the fastest way to lose your audience? Leave the excitement out. Click on the tab.

Tense Plots

Turn your movie into a sleeping pill for the TV midnight movie set. Not. Use characters and conflict effect to keep people on the edge of their seats. Click on the tab.

What to Say

Dialogue is what people say: their exact words without "quotation marks" or *he said, she felt, she*

remembered, etc. Each line of dialogue should be as short as possible—don't talk to us like you talk to your friends. Click on the tab.

What to Wear

I've heard it said (to me), "No self respecting screenwriter sports a briefcase or a suit." This special section is for the fashion conscious writer. Click on the tab.

Writing Short

You can write a short story and still win an Academy Award. (No promises.)

Secrets

Write so it Will be Read

Screenplays follow an easy format; and if they're not in it, no one will read it. Click on the tab.

Best Kept Secret in Hollywood

One word strikes terror in the hearts of young people and mature adults alike - rewrite. But according to the experts, rewriting is the secret to creating a good script. Before you turn up your nose, I've listed in this section some of the best secrets for rewriting that can help turn your hours of work into a story that really works. Click on the tab.



Get Help!

Everyone can use a little help from a friend now and then. The best thing to do is talk to others about your story and get their input (unless you're very sensitive). Ask others what they would do in a situation similar to your character's. Other resources are available. Click on the tab.

About

Stealing Your Script

Major studios are honest and million dollar lawsuits discourage the dishonest from plagiarizing stories. But chances are, if you have an idea, you will see something like it within the next three years. Click on the tab.

Teacher's Inf.

Students may safely skip this part unless they are afraid the teacher is learning secrets they should know. Click on the tab.

About National Writers Workshop

National Writers Workshop asked me to write this guide as part of their pilot program for assisting teachers to add screenwriting to existing writing courses. The Workshop is a nonprofit organization that assists new screenwriters to develop marketable scripts, and it is supported by major Hollywood studios. For more information, click on the tab.

About this Guide

Want to know more about the copyright on this guide, or why this thing is free, or availability on current and future versions, or the history behind this guide? Click on the tab.

What To Wear: Loose fitting clothes with large vegetable patterns. Just kidding!

An anecdote about change

I originally wrote this as a printed guide with a Quick Start section which conveniently doubled as a Table of Contents. Nifty, I thought. Innovative. Resourceful. Un-traditional - should appeal to high school students. Good way to get right into the good stuff and skip the boring tables. Pat on the back. I sent this for review to a screenwriter friend of mine. I received it back with red ink oozing from the envelope corners. He's an English teacher. He had drawn a happy face on it. His first comment was, "Where's the Table of Contents?" You see, we're programmed to expect one. If we don't have one a book is incomprehensible to us - we don't know how to get into it. So trapped in a traditional world, I put the Contents section back in.

Well, this is now an electronic book. Guess what - hypertext jumps! Jumps aren't linear or logical - you can go from point "a" to point "f" to point "c" if it suits you. But now, being more sensitive to those trapped in a traditional framework, I put in a Contents section. So if you've begun to tremble and your eyes are starting to spin, just [Click this text](#) and there it is. (Boring.)

Sorry, this is not an expanded topic. The text on this page is all there is.

[Making Fascinating Characters:](#)

Click the green text to see the full topic.

Creating characters who have real wants and needs is a great place to start. Often the best stories come straight from the characters.

So, create your main character and an opposing character, then a couple of friends. Throw them together in a situation where they're struggling for something they want, and there it is - the story writes itself.

What To Write:

Click the green text to see the full topic.

- Write about what interests you. It will be more fun and if it interest you it will probably interest others.
- Unusual things and surprises really get attention (but don't get too radical).
- If the outcome of the story is predictable, I can predict a lullaby rating.
- Humor can be a helpful element in any story, but too much humor spoils it.
- One page equals about one minute of screen time, so shoot for ten to thirty pages, which is typically about three to twelve scenes. **Hint:** it's easier in some ways to write thirty pages than ten because shorter stories require more intensity.

Writing Methods:

Click the green text to see the full topic.

Use the method best suited to you - just get started. At some early point you should write out the plot or story line so you don't waste ten erasers.

[Dramatic Structure:](#)

Click the green text to see the full topic.

Stories have three acts... exciting acts! Grab a pencil and write your own outline using this one as an example. You'll be surprised how easy it is.

Act I grabs our attention like cool drinks on a hot beach. Main characters dazzle us with their entrances, and a problem we're dying to see solved develops into a big crisis: **somebody wants something really really badly!** For example, Tom wants to star in the basketball final, needs to complete his rock collection for geology, but needs an A on his calculus final to pass high school, both are tomorrow - and he hasn't studied all semester!

The crisis launches us into Act II, which will be about fifty percent of the story. There the main character (Tom) struggles to get his prize. But the problems get bigger and bigger, draining his strength and destroying his will. Tom's worst enemy is the only person in town who has the rock he needs. Tom sprains his ankle. He realizes all this talk in calculus about triangles was about math, not art. And his girl friend is dumping him. Beaten and broken he must do the impossible - which moves the story into Act III.

We're on the edge of our seats going into Act III! Will Tom win this final battle and get his rock collection gathered from eighty city blocks (where his angry girl friend dumped them), and ace the calculus test, and win the ball game with a sprained ankle? Some way Tom succeeds at something important and learns something in the process. Easy, isn't it? Dramatic structure is explained in more detail in a sample story line, [Prom Date](#). Click the green text to see the full topic.

The Plot: What is going to happen in your story? The basic plot is the main source of conflict, which creates tension. Plots have to have conflict to keep our interest. Tension comes from the main characters opposing each other or striving for something. Then all the details that drive the story this way and that make up the full plot. Writing the full story without knowing the plot, is a gamble that everything will work, and frequently it doesn't. Click the hot text to go to the topic.

Click the green text to see the full topic.

The Scene: The fundamental building block of screenplays. It lasts an average of three minutes and takes place in one location. When the location or time changes, it is a new scene. Think of scenes as situations that are like a mini-story. Click the hot text to go to the topic.

Click the green text to see the full topic.

Dialogue: Dialogue is what people say: their exact words without quotation marks or *he said, she felt, she remembered*, etc. Each line of dialogue should be as short as possible - don't talk to us like you talk to your friends. Click the hot text to go to the topic.

Click the green text to see the full topic.

Beware!

Some mistakes will earn you the title of *amateur*. Avoid these things and you'll look good on paper.

Click the green text to see the full topic..

Format: Screenplays follow an easy format; and if they're not in it, no one will read it.
[See the example.](#)

Click the green text to see the full topic.

[Set-ups and Characters For Short Scripts:](#) Ten to twenty page short scripts make special demands on character and plot. Make it easier on yourself - *read more about this.*

Click the green text to see the full topic.

Script Doctor tip 1

A quick start and continued success

Writers Workshop Script Doctor is a book, and an electronic book, for beginning screen writers, and also for more advanced screenwriters who need their creative skills reawakened. It will make you think. It will help you look at your story critically, and find and correct the things that prevent it from working. It also contains extensive information on creating characters, and other information. *Script Doctor* includes the top twenty mistakes that writers make, based on statistics from evaluations of scripts submitted to National Writers Workshop.

Each topic has a Script Doctor button in it. Click this button for a tip from *Script Doctor*, and for more information about what *Script Doctor* offers.

Script Doctor tip 2 dramatic structure and plot

Five power points in three-act drama

A powerful plot may sell even with weak characters. Plot is that valuable. Yet, in the highly competitive screenplay arena, good plots must be exceptional. Briefly following are seven tips that will help make your plot a success.

The *five power points in three act drama* section of *Writers Workshop Script Doctor*, gives clues to strategic points that make powerful plots:

Avoid formulas

Crisis and decision points: Use Crisis To Develop Crucial Scenes

Five power points in three act drama

Power point 1: Hook that engages viewer interest

Power point 2: Crisis that motivates the main character into action

Power point 3: Mounting tension through three obstacles

Power point 4: Climactic challenge that seems insurmountable

Power point 5: Satisfying resolution

Script Doctor tip 3

What to write: choices, choices, choices

As a story begins to take shape, a writer is faced with numerous choices. What concept shapes the storyline? What genre should the story be written in: should I make this a heavy drama, or would it work better as a light comedy? How real should the sex scenes be? Can I get away without doing research? How true to life should I make the story? Where should I start writing - with characters, situation, or plot? Should I write the story in scenes, or try writing in sequences?

Informed decisions can prevent a lot of rewriting. I know, I know, you really can't wait to do some extensive rewriting.

But if not, the following subjects are covered in *Writers Workshop Script Doctor*:

- **Choosing A Genre**
 - **Genre Is Perspective, Mood And Style**
- **Comedy: Highest Art**
- **Romantic Comedy: Always Good**
- **Action/Adventure: Best Seller**
- **Mystery, Suspense Thrillers**
- **Tragedy**
- **Using Concept To Focus The Story**
 - **Base The Story On Character Or Situation?**
 - **Realism: Where To Draw The Line**
 - **Sequences: Advanced Writing Technique**

Script Doctor tip 4

How to write

Writing is a process. How is writing a process? There are many elements that go into writing and they all interact. To state the opposite, you might set a goal of writing a story where a man goes after a fish and encounters several obstacles along the way and finally gets the fish. You have established a simple goal and can probably write the story from beginning to end without a stop. Some writers write this way. But most of us underestimate just how complicated a good story really is, or how much work goes into creating it.

In the section on the process of writing, *Writers Workshop Script Doctor* thoroughly describe the process of writing, including the following chapters:

- **Developing Honest Characters & Powerful Plots**
- **Becoming Free To Explore**
- **Base The Story On Character Or Situation?**
- **How To Use Motivation To Form Characters And Plot**

Script Doctor tip 5

Making characters that live and breathe

Why try to understand human motivation - aren't people very complex?

The more real a character is the more engaging he is, especially if he is unique and addresses a problem we identify with. So it makes sense to develop a character as fully as possible. So becoming a student of human motivation will help you make good characters every time.

***Writers Workshop Script Doctor* has chapters like the following to help you understand character motivation:**

- **A Character Motivation Primer**
 - **Becoming Free To Explore**
- **Writing As Discovery And Integration**
- **Destiny?**
- **Character Growth**
- **Originality: Stretch Your Writing Skills**
- **The Process Of Change**
 - **Quick Cues To Character Motivation**
- **Developing Characters Using Motivation**
- **How To Use Motivation To Form Characters And Plot**

Script Doctor tip 6: Making powerful plots

Five power points in three-act drama

A powerful plot may sell even with weak characters. Plot is that valuable. Yet, in the highly competitive screenplay arena, good plots must be exceptional. Briefly following are seven tips that will help make your plot a success.

The *five power points in three act drama* section of *Writers Workshop Script Doctor*, gives clues to strategic points that make powerful plots:

- **Avoid formulas**
- **Crisis and decision points: Use Crisis To Develop Crucial Scenes**
- **Five power points in three act drama**
 - Power point 1: Hook that engages viewer interest**
 - Power point 2: Crisis that motivates the main character into action**
 - Power point 3: Mounting tension through three obstacles**
 - Power point 4: Climactic challenge that seems insurmountable**
 - Power point 5: Satisfying resolution**
- **How To Use Motivation To Form Characters And Plot**

Script Doctor tip 7 Making electric scenes

The reader has an imagination and will use it if it is stimulated. If you can draw him into the drama, he will supply all the details necessary and not even know it. Engaging his imagination will electrify the scenes.

Writers Workshop Script Doctor gives you the tools for engaging them in chapters like the following:

- **Originality: Using Conflict And Viewer's Imagination To Develop Original Scenes**
- **Consistency: Making Action Follow From Previous Drama**
 - **Movement: Making Action Move The Story**
 - **Entering: Making An Entrance**
- **Risk: Increasing Emotion And Tension**
- **Electric Scenes: Getting What You Want In A Scene**

Script Doctor tip 8 Making dialogue relevant

Dialogue is when characters talk - that's all it can be. Information important to the story can't be given in the scene description/instruction lines because if the characters don't say it, it will never get to the audience. So avoid making remarks in the scene instructions like, "It was ten o'clock on a sultry August evening in an isolated beach community. John had been watching TV and Phyllis, who worshipped him, had left an hour earlier...." None of this information gets to the viewer so it is totally irrelevant. If the character doesn't say it in dialogue or make it obvious through some action, then for all practical purposes it isn't in the script.

Writers Workshop Script Doctor has chapters on dialogue like the following:

- Pumping Up Dialogue
- Relevant: Moving The Story Forward
- Showing: Avoiding Exposition And Sermons
- Length: Less Is More

Script Doctor tip 9

Twenty of the biggest secrets

If you had a ten thousand dollar car sitting in your drive with a flat tire, what would you do with it? Park it behind the garage? Shuffle it around to the car lots trying to sell it as damaged goods? Read a book on how to design a car? Unless you're eccentric or insane (appreciate that I'm on dangerous ground here), you would probably invest a few dollars in fixing the tire - makes sense. But what do you do with a screenplay that doesn't sell? One you have invested a lot of yourself in, with a potential value of forty thousand or more. Keep shuffling it around to agents and contests? Park it on the top shelf of a closet? Read yet another book telling the same old things? Yes! Writers do with their screenplays what they wouldn't do with their car.

Writers Workshop Script Doctor shows you how to find and repair the twenty most common mistakes made by writers in chapters on characterization, plot and structure, scenes, and dialogue:

CHARACTERIZATION: PROBLEMS & CURES

- 1 - Motivation: Motivating Puppet Characters
- 2 - Originality: Fixing Stereotypes With Added Dimensions
- 3 - Consistency: Resolving "Out of Character" Problems
- 4 - Main Character: Deciding Who Drives
- 5 - Change and Growth: Making Characters Change
- 6 - Dull and Uninteresting: Making Characters Sparkle

Excursus One: How To Raise Dead Characters

STRUCTURE: PROBLEMS & CURES

- 7 - Plot: Strengthen Weak Or Unfocused Plots
- 8 - Originality: Outrun Tired, Predictable Storylines
 - Nothing New Under The Sun?
 - Last Resort Mind Stretching Technique
- 9 - Confusing: Watch For Contradictory And Unexplained Actions
- 10 - Manipulated Or Contrived: Avoid Mechanical Solutions
- 11 - Payoff: Make Every Scene And Setup Have Punch
- 12 - Credibility: Make Your Premise And Plot Believable
- 13 - Anecdotal Stories: Avoid The "Storyteller's" Pitfall

Excursus Two: Five Power Points In Three-Act Drama

- Avoiding Formulas**
- Crisis And Decision Points**

SCENES & DRAMA: PROBLEMS & CURES

- 14 - Originality: Using Conflict And Viewer's Imagination To Develop Original Scenes**
- 15 - Consistency: Making Action Follow From Previous Drama**
- 16 - Movement: Making Action Move The Story**
 - Entering: Making An Entrance**
- 17 - Risk: Increasing Emotion And Tension**

DIALOGUE: PROBLEMS & CURES

- 18 - Relevant: Moving The Story Forward**
- 19 - Showing: Avoiding Exposition And Sermons**
- 20 - Length: Less Is More**

