

Screenwriting Unpacked

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Stories

Introduction

Most screenwriting books start off immediately with how to write a script. This is all very well, but if you are going to be doing this for the rest of your life, if you are serious about becoming a writer, then you want to ask yourself, repeatedly, “Why do I want to write?”.

Why write a screenplay?

There is a saying that “Screenwriting isn’t rocket science - it’s harder”. There will be days when you are struggling with your story. At these times it’s good to remind yourself of why you wanted to do this crazy thing in the first place.

Your inspiration

Different things inspire different writers. Ideally, you write because you have to write. But most people think they want to write for very strange reasons. Fame, money, travel, respect, awards and even acclaim are just some reasons people think they want to write. However, if it’s money you want, become an accountant. Yes, you can achieve some of those things through screenwriting but if you look closely at your life, it’s almost certain that the reasons you want to write aren’t those.

Free-writing Exercise:

Free-writing is writing without stopping. The only rule in free-writing is not to stop writing, no matter what. Just write. Let the words stream onto the page. Even if you are writing “This is boring. It’s hot today. I don’t know why I am writing this. Blah, blah, blah”. It doesn’t matter. Just write whatever comes into your head. Your pen shouldn’t remain still for a second. The idea is not to think but to allow your subconscious to work.

- Get a pen and paper (this exercise must be done with pen and paper and not on a computer).
- Write the following sentence: “I want to write because I feel I...”
- And then write.
- Don’t stop.
- Don’t edit.
- Write a whole A4 page before stopping.
- Re-read what you have read only once you have written it.

If you review what you have written, you may be surprised by the outcome. Fame and money may still be in there but perhaps other things have arrived like “To change the world” or “To get people to escape” or “To show people what is in my mind”.

At best, writing is a way of discovering yourself, your community, your world and your relationship to it.

“I think that you just have to write from your heart, though many people and your friends and your family will tell you it’s not commercial, but you just have to go ahead and write what you want to

write. It has to come from your heart, because if you write it from your head or your wallet...forget it." – Anna Hamilton Phelan

"I have to write to be happy whether I get paid for it or not. But it is a hell of a disease to be born with. I like to do it. Which is even worse. That makes it from a disease into a vice. Then I want to do it better than anyone has ever done it, which makes it into an obsession." – Ernest Hemingway

"It's bad if I write but worse if I don't." – J.M. Coetzee

Feel before you write

Introspection is not something that a lot of people in the film industry are good at. But writers should be good at it. In order to really move people, it helps to think about what you are doing, why you are doing it and what you want to say before you even begin the process of writing. Of course it helps not to think too much either. Sometimes it's best to just write and stop thinking too much!

The ethics of screenwriting

Whether you like it or not, each and every movie makes a statement. It's like an argument. Depending on how characters solve their problems in the film, if they solve them at all, suggests something about how problems should be solved in the real world.

Even if it's an action film, it still has a message behind it. For example, in *Die Hard 1*, the main character, played by Bruce Willis, fights a whole lot of bad guys to save his wife. What the film is "saying" is that one man, if he's brave and true, can save the day. It's also saying that family is important. It's also saying that marriage is worth dying for. It's also saying that it's okay to kill many strangers in order to save the one person we love.

Although these messages are not why the film was made, the audience leaves the cinema with these messages encoded into their minds. This is why it's so important to know what you want to say.

Sometimes filmmakers think they are saying one thing and end up saying another. Many people thought that *Avatar* was a film about living at one with the environment. The reason they said that, was because the "baddies" were trying to mine a planet for the badly named "unobtainium" mineral, and the "goodies" were some kind of ethno-aboriginal blue people. There were also lots of scenes in an amazing (un)natural world where plants, flowers and animals dazzle the viewer with their beauty.

However, if you look closely at *Avatar*, it's essentially saying something that Hollywood movies have been saying a long time, and that is that "might makes right". What that means is that the people who win the fight are "right". The fact that they have to fight in the first place isn't questioned. The blue people don't sit down with the miners in a United Nations type conference and work out their differences. (Admittedly, this wouldn't make a gripping film). Rather, they fight them, and then call in help from "nature" (who they are meant to be protecting, and according to the story world, shouldn't get involved), who basically is bigger, badder and stronger than the miners. This violence is also evident when the main character wrestles a creature to the ground (in World Wrestling Entertainment style) and says, "You're mine now". He now owns that creature. His violence has dominated it and therefore he has control over it. At heart, *Avatar* is actually about violence and the power of violence.

This kind of deep analysis of film is something that the screenwriter needs to practise. Film has the power to affect many people, and as a writer, you need to be clear on what you want to say. You also need to be clear on how you say it, in order to effectively communicate your message.

The message from the *Spiderman* movies seems to be relevant here: "With great power comes great responsibility".

Learn to look deeply into stories and into yourself.

Sending a message without preaching

When Samuel Goldwyn headed up MGM Studios he said, “If you want to send a message, use Western Union”. Western Union is an American courier company. He meant that film is not a very effective way to send a message or make a point. Sure, he is right in some ways, but as we’ve seen above, the audience will read into your film whether you like it or not.

Perhaps what can be taken from the above quote is that you should never preach with a script. That is propaganda. The last thing people want to see when watching a film is a character standing up and saying exactly what the writer wants to say. You have to hide your message in the film. Put your message in the actions, in how the characters solve problems, in what happens to them. But don’t preach. If you preach with your stories, you will lose your audience.

Know what you are saying, but leave preaching to the politicians and the priests.

Theme

A theme is the term that describes what a movie is about. It’s the subject of the film and is often a value such as “trust” or “greed”. For example, the theme of *Kill Bill* is revenge.

Essential screenwriting terms

This course will make use of terms such as script, screenplay, scene and sequence. It is important to know the differences between these terms.

Script

“Script” in the broader sense of the word normally refers to any kind of writing. You can have a “script” for a play, a “script” from an ancient language written on a pharaoh’s tomb or a “script” written by a doctor to give to a pharmacist. For the purposes of this course, when the word “script” is used, it’s referring to a piece of writing particularly for film, television, and radio or even for the theatre. It helps to be precise when using the word, for example, a “Film Script”, a “TV Script” or a “Radio Script”.

Screenplay

A “screenplay” is a script or “play” written particularly for the screen. This can refer to the cinema screen, the television screen or even, these days, to the computer screen. Sometimes, television scripts are referred to as “Teleplays” but this is mostly in the United States.

“Screenwriting” therefore refers to the act of writing a screenplay. It’s literally “writing for the screen”. If you are screenwriting, you are also writing a blueprint for a team of people, not just for “the screen”.

Scene

A “scene” seems like an easy thing to define. Essentially, a scene change happens in a film when there is a change of time or space. Developing a strong sense of when there is a scene change is a vital skill for screenwriters.

Example:

Four bank robbers arrive outside a bank, three get out, one stays in the car. The three enter the bank, and in the lobby they fire off a few rounds and grab a few hostages. Two men stay in the lobby while the third robber enters the bank vault and starts to crack the safe. Back at the lobby, a security guard presses the alarm button. In the car, the getaway driver hears the alarm going off. The robber opens the safe, grabs the cash and leaves. In the lobby, the other two see the robber leaving with the cash and they run out with him. Outside the bank, all three men pile into the car and they screech away.

How many scenes can you see in the above sequence?

There are eight scenes in the above example.

- Outside the bank as they arrive;
- In the lobby with hostages;
- Robber starting to crack the safe;
- In the lobby with the security guard;
- In the car outside the bank;
- Robber opening the safe;
- In the lobby as they leave; and
- Outside the bank as they drive away.

Scripts are divided up into scenes, and being precise about what exactly a scene is, is therefore very important. When you watch films, from now on, pay close attention to when there is a change in space or time, and get to know when scenes change.

Sequence

A “sequence” is a series of scenes around a central idea. While making a film, or writing one, you may refer to a “sequence”. The example above is a series of scenes that may be referred to as “the bank heist sequence”.

Another example could be a “falling-in-love sequence”. A couple meet, they have dinner, they go to a fair, he wins her a teddy, they ride a Ferris wheel, they walk in a park, they kiss in the moonlight and they end up in bed.

Or another sequence might be from an action movie like the *Bourne Ultimatum*. A whole lot of action happens when Bourne meets a contact at Paddington Station, and they are chased through the station where the contact is shot. This could be referred to as the “Paddington Station sequence”. Again, all these examples are a series of scenes around a central concept.

A story fit for the screen

The writer-detective

Screenwriters, like all writers of fiction, are always on the lookout for good stories. As a writer, you are always working. You may not be sitting in front of a laptop but you are always looking for stories.

Think of yourself as a private detective on the trail of a good story. In your day-to-day life, sitting in the family lounge, shopping in the supermarket, driving in the traffic or hanging out at the mall, you should always be sniffing out stories. Be present. Notice what is going on around you. Stories are happening around you all the time.

Investigate your world:

Keep a journal, like a detective, in which you write notes about what you see in the world around you. Take pictures with your phone of interesting people and locations. Be a story sleuth.

Develop your inner story sleuth by looking out for the following things.

Unique locations

It could be a bar, a barn or a bordello. Make sure that when you see a location that you haven't seen in a film before, you make a note of it.

Out of the ordinary things

Keep an eye out for events that you haven't seen before. It could be something as simple as a whole lot of men changing a streetlight using a cherry-picker. How do they do it? Why did it catch your eye? Maybe it's a homeless man in a smart suit, a butch rugby player singing to his baby. Look for the extraordinary in the everyday.

Looks or glances exchanged

Learn to see behind what people are saying. Look for specific glances; the look a waitress gives a rude customer, the look a fast food restaurant manager gives the cleaner. These small everyday encounters feed stories. Learn to love them.

Eccentric personalities

That uncle at the wedding who has had too much to drink and tries to dance with the bride rather too amorously, the security guard who acts like he has a degree in philosophy, the yoga instructor losing her cool at the parking guard. These are all personalities that you need to learn to love and to capture in your journal. They may come in handy some day. Stories leap off people like this.

Ask questions

If someone tells you about something that happened to them, be it a wedding they attended, a funeral, a car accident they were involved in, anything that they find worthy to tell you, chances are there is a story there. Don't be shy to ask questions. Without prying too much (and without obviously taking out your notebook), make sure that you find out the details. It's these little details from real events that give screenplays real power and originality.

Don't judge

Just like a good detective needs to keep emotions out of their investigations, as you move through the world as a writer, it helps if you don't judge people too harshly. Try and put yourself in their shoes. This is essential when writing complex characters. If someone is a mean boss, try and imagine why. What makes them that way? Then, when you come to writing characters you may not like, you will create real, compelling villains.

Identifying a good story

It's very difficult to know what makes a good story. Knowing what will make a good story, and what will work for the screen, is something you will hone and develop your whole life.

You naturally know what a good story is already. During the holidays from school, something happens. You come to school on the first day and you can't wait to tell your friends about it. That burning desire to share a story means that it probably has narrative currency. That means it's a story that can be told, and even better, sold.

Hook

A hook is the thing that fascinates you about a story. It's the heart of the matter. All good stories have hooks. Sometimes the hook ends up being the tagline. For example, *Aliens* is simply about a monster on a spaceship - "Jaws in Space". *Romeo and Juliet's* hook is: a couple, from two feuding families, falls in love.

Simple

The best stories are the simple ones. Not too many characters. Not too many locations. Not too many themes. It should be a story you could tell to your friends, or around a campfire.

Unique

As Blake Snyder says so well in his book on screenwriting, *Save the Cat*, people want "The same...but different". Films should be unique and have their own special story, or location or characters. Being fresh or having a twist is vital for a good story. However, the stories that sell the best are unique but recognisable. If you just make a crazy film that very few people have seen, it might do well on the art circuit. But if you can make a unique film that fits into a recognisable form, like romantic comedy but different, you have *Blue Valentine*: "The same...but different".

Conflict

All drama is conflict. It's difficult, if not impossible, to have a story that doesn't have some kind of conflict. A man struggles to make a woman love him (*500 Days of Summer*). A man struggles while trapped under a boulder (*127 Hours*). People battle for power and a throne (*Game of Thrones*). All films have conflict at their heart. A main character wants something, and ideally someone else either wants the same thing, or wants something different. The conflict can also be internal, for example, a man struggles with his guilt and self-loathing (*Leaving Las Vegas*).

Universal

The best stories can be understood around the world. It's what everyone is looking for, especially in South Africa: a local story with universal appeal. A good story should have characters and conflicts that anyone in the world can recognise. If characters struggle with what it truly means to be human, then the story will be enjoyed the world over.

Culturally specific

Just because a story is universal does not mean that it should be set in some imaginary world that is, for example, half Cape Town, half America. Rather be specific. American films are always specific. It's either New York, or Los Angeles or a China Town. The same can be said for successful local films. *Material*, with Riaad Moosa, is set in the Muslim community of Johannesburg. The characters are specific for that place and time. The themes are universal. The more specific you can get, the better. If you know Cape Town, write about something in Cape Town but get even more specific. Write about a suburb of Cape Town. If you are from a small town, don't just write about some generic town; write about the town you know. If you don't know one, take a drive and research it. Keep it specific. Keep it real.