THE SCRIPTUP WRITERS’ GUIDE
Welcome to the ScriptUp Writers’ Guide, a step-by-step look at the process behind transforming your film idea into an expertly executed screenplay. The ScriptUp Writers’ Guide has been crafted by our team at ScriptUp to give you an insightful but flexible blueprint to translating your creativity, passion and vision into a screenplay with immense potential. We hope that, irrespective of the stage you find your screenplay in, from the smallest germ of an idea to a completed draft, the ScriptUp Writers’ Guide offers you the advice you need hear to take your project to the next level. At ScriptUp we are committed to supporting the writers who connect with us as best we can and have put a great deal of time and effort into this document with the hope of being able to demonstrate our commitment to the art of the screenplay in a manner that is most useful to our writers.

We look forward to reading your screenplay when it is ready!

Your ScriptUp Team
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INTRODUCTION

The screenplay, and the art of screenwriting, are the bedrock on which successful films, commercially, critically and otherwise, are founded. It is often said that a film is made three times: first it is made through the raw creativity pouring onto the screenwriter’s pages, then it is made over again in amongst the busy energy and high stakes of the film set, and then finally it is remade one further time, through the slow and considered process negotiated in the editing suite. As the primary stage of this arduous and diverse creative procedure, screenwriting is a field full of limitations and opportunities.

Some screenwriters will watch all of their own vision for a film that they carefully laid out in script form turn into something they can hardly recognise. For some this can be demoralising, for others, it’s utterly thrilling. But the central lesson learned is that the screenplay is limited by the inherently collaborative nature of the process of filmmaking. On the other hand, within that limited framework, the screenplay is immensely powerful. A good way to think of a screenplay is as the screenwriter’s chance to set down the guiding principles for the film. It is the writer’s responsibility to choose very carefully what these principles are and to justify their existence and their continued protection across the course of production. The length, structure, rhythms, the nature of each character, the vital plot arcs; all of these are decisions which, no matter how many people end up involved with the resultant film, can be recognisable from the text of the screenplay to the pixels of the screen.

At ScriptUp, we value the role of the screenwriter as a necessarily vital part of the process of making a film. It’s no coincidence that, in just about any film you watch, the screenwriter is the second name on the credits at the end of the film, after the director. Sadly, in Hollywood and mainstream cinema at large, the formulaic nature to much of what is produced makes the screenwriter and their work seem incidental, nothing more than a necessary cog in a large factory engine. Not only does this misrepresent the many writers responsible for the immense range of unique and innovative work produced each year, it is damaging to the industry as a whole, a disheartening and discouraging message to the diverse range of talented would-be screenwriters. From our perspective, if you want to be a screenwriter, the only limits you should have are the bounds of your imagination.
George Lucas once said that “Learning to make films is very easy. Learning what to make films about is very hard”. The question of what to make films about, that Lucas so succinctly touches on, is what screenwriters endlessly wrestle with throughout their careers. When you finally come to some conclusions about what you want to write about, your reward is another, even more testing question: “How do I turn my idea into a good screenplay?”. In a lot of cases that is where the creative process ends. Actually putting pen to paper is a bold step that most people simply aren’t prepared for. Suddenly, the burden of the commitment of spending weeks and months trying to make something of value weakens their enthusiasm and drains their creativity. A good idea, but one for a rainy day. However, for those of you determined enough, with a strong enough belief in your idea, your vision, it’s time to take the next step.

This Writers’ Guide will act as a support for you any time you are doubting yourself or the process. A collection of guiding thoughts, structures and principles that will help you when you need to step away from your work and consider your next move. The ScriptUp ethos is that being overly prescriptive in regard to the methodology for screenwriting is unwise, especially in the face of the volume of unconventional scripts that have gone on to make interesting and exciting films. The Guide won’t tell you what you should do, it will tell you what you could do and explain why that course of action might help you. Remember, this is your script and you have to be the one driving it forward, no-one else.

So, with that said, let’s embark on your journey towards bringing your screenplay to life!
CHAPTER 1
Generating and nurturing your ideas.

In The Beginning…
There are two routes into deciding to write a screenplay: with or without an idea.

For a lot of writers an idea for a screenplay occurs to them first and propels them into turning the idea into a screenplay. This route is quite common since ideas for screenplays often suggest themselves spontaneously to people. Film is a visual art form that, regardless of the director’s intentions, works to explore human nature and the essence of living. This is true whether the film is ‘American Pie’ or ‘2001: A Space Odyssey’. The result of this is that the stories and characters that make good films can often be found playing out in real life. A friend might inadvertently trigger an idea for a script in your mind when they tell you a funny story about one of their co-workers over dinner. The more you think about the story the more it occurs to you that it could make a good film. But how would that happen? Well, you have to write a screenplay.

For other people, they set out searching for ideas with the intention of writing a screenplay, they just don’t know about what. Screenwriters and writer-directors often find themselves in this position, or even just people who are big fans of film and start thinking that they’d like to have a go. Whatever angle you’re coming at it from, actively searching for ideas for screenplays can be tough simply because you haven’t yet had that creative spark, that organic flash of potential that you get if a screenplay spontaneously appears in your mind.

Regardless of your situation, here’s a good principle to live by as you think about writing a screenplay:

A good writer is open-minded at all times to people in all walks of life.

This is an important attitude that will really help you in the early stages of screenwriting. Empathy is a vital tool in the writer’s toolkit, since to write believable, three-dimensional characters set in believable, three-dimensional stories, you have to write with an intimate level of understanding, no matter how horrible or annoying they are. It also allows you to write scripts that people aren’t expecting, another
powerful asset for a screenwriter.

Having said that you need to be open-minded to the world and look beyond yourself as a way to find material for your films; it’s equally viable to write from your own life. When you start out screenwriting, with no reputation or catalogue of work to support you, it can feel a bit silly writing from your own life. If a friend or family member asks you what you’re writing about you may feel a little embarrassed that your idea might not seem very grand or adventurous to them. But you have to remember that to the rest of the world, your idea is completely unique. No-one else will know about the time that you were playing hide-and-seek as a child and stumbled into a hidden cellar where you found all of the life possessions of someone who used to live in the area years before your family moved there. It might do the rounds over Christmas dinner with your family each year, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t a great story.

Once you’ve arrived on an idea that you think has potential, you have to see if it is a real prospect.

**Prospecting For Gold(en Ideas)**

Ideas are fickle. They might look one way as you turn them over in your mind’s eye in the middle of a sleepless night, only to look completely different as you think about them over breakfast the next morning. Sometimes you can write ideas down, which is a very good habit to get into, only to read them back wondering what you could possibly have been thinking. In fact, if you talk to most creative people, you’ll find that coming up with an idea is often not their actual issue. Open up a newspaper and in a single read through you’ll likely spot dozens of potential ideas that, if you gave them enough thought, might possibly turn into something.

Finding the idea that will turn into your new screenplay involves differentiating between fleeting ideas and what we’ll call ‘prospects’. A prospect was once an idea, but an idea isn’t necessarily going to become a prospect. A prospect means an idea for your script that has certain signs of having real potential for actually being something that you would write, not just something you could write. The more you do this, the more you’ll develop your own criteria for making this call. For some it will be how
much research they’d have to do in order to write the script convincingly, for others it will be whether they’d actually enjoy the process of writing the script. For others still, it will be something much more abstract, holistic even - a feeling of connectivity with the idea that goes beyond practicalities. If you’re struggling with assessing your ideas, then here’s a good starting technique:

*Take the idea in your mind and try and imagine a strong beginning and ending scene to the script. If you can imagine both, then there’s a very good chance that you’ve got a prospect on your hands.*

In assessing your idea, it’s possible to be too picky. You can’t necessarily hold out for the perfect idea, the idea where all of the moving parts immediately slot into place in your mind. In all likelihood, this will simply never happen. The same goes for searching for originality in your idea. Originality is an interesting but difficult concept that you’re better off ignoring, as Jim Jarmusch puts it: “Authenticity is invaluable; originality is non-existent”.

**Nurturing Your Prospect**

Like a freshly sprouted seedling, your script prospect needs to be nurtured before it can begin to grow fully. To abandon the gardening simile for a moment, you have to workshop your prospect before you can start to get stuck in with the real writing. A good way to think about this process is to imagine yourself as a scientist who has just received a new element found on a faraway planet. During this stage, your mind should be rife with possibility and expectation, but also unafraid to embrace the uncertainty of a new idea for a screenplay. Probe your idea, stretch it, turn it inside out and challenge it as much as you can. You can compare and contrast it to other films like it or put the idea past friends and gauge their reactions. You can take the plot and play it in reverse, or examine all the potential alternative directions your plot could head in. As you do this, keep track of what you feel about the tests that you are running, and write down anything that you discover as it could be useful later.

*The more that you test your idea, the more you will learn about it, which is key. Understanding the nature of your idea will be essential for crafting a cohesive screenplay.*
As you continue to experiment, things will become apparent to you about how you want your script to proceed, and how you don’t want it to as well. Once you start getting a solid grasp on the idea, and you have satisfied yourself that it stands up to the tests that you have done, it’s time to start bringing it to life. The first step of that process is planning.

A Plan Of Action
Planning a screenplay isn’t like anything else that you’ll ever plan for. Given that its contents come directly from your mind, it’s evident that it is a process that demands some flexibility. And, in fact, flexibility is going to be a key concept to cling on to as you continue. Though planning is a very important step in turning your idea into a screenplay, it’s not like planning an essay, for example, where you can do so with a degree of precision that allows the actual writing of the essay to be a procedural execution of the plan. The reason for this is that a screenplay is a learning experience. When you’re in university, you’re asked to write essays at various points, but it would be highly unorthodox to show up on the first day of a class and be told to write one straight away. That’s because there is an understanding that an essay is used as a way to judge whether you have adequately understood the teaching and reading on a certain subject to a level where you can write about it fluently and with dexterity.

There is no obligation to write a screenplay like this and it would be a very tall order if you had to. As we’ll continue to discover throughout the guide, screenwriting is a skill that requires you to give yourself perpetual feedback, derived from the very material that you are writing. This oxymoronic process is key for shaping your screenplay, from characters to plot points. Learning as you write requires great flexibility to incorporate ideas that, before you began a scene, hadn’t occurred to you at all.

Not very helpful advice for putting together a plan, you might point out. And you’re right in identifying that it is a bit antithetical to the whole idea of a plan. But there is one very helpful guiding principle to keep in mind, that will make your life a lot easier if you are able to adhere to it throughout:

Know where you are coming from and where you are going, scene by scene and across the plot as a whole.
Ignoring this piece of advice could be very dangerous to your screenplay - let’s examine two reasons why. The first is that there simply isn’t room in your script for scenes that don’t advance the story in some way. Writing any scene into a script where the audience hasn’t advanced in their understanding of the story, is a big mistake. Films should never be longer than they need to be, and you need to make sure that, as the screenwriter, you aren’t doing anything that might cause the film to have any excess weight on it. William Faulkner hits the nail on the head: “In writing, you have to kill your darlings.” A script that hasn’t been planned with that idea of progression of story, of knowing your beginning and your end, is liable to have scenes in it which are pointless. They might seem clever, maybe you can picture how pretty they’d look, but if they aren’t helping your story, they have to go.

The second reason is that, if you’re starting to write your script and you still don’t know where it’s going, then somewhere along the way you mistook your passing idea as a prospect. At this stage in the operation, you need to go back and rework your idea if you don’t feel a sense in which you have an end goal in mind. Given that the end goal will likely be connected to the point of the script, the reason for justifying its existence, you’re asking for trouble by embarking on the writing with that void in place. A good plan will apply this same overarching idea of journey to each act of the script and to each scene. It would be wise to even extend the principle as far as each line. Writing a clever script doesn’t mean writing a long-winded one with lots of lines, quite the opposite. Justify the journey of every element as you plan and let the filling of your script appear organically within that framework as you write.

Beyond understanding your script’s journey, the further details of what you might plan are up to you and the nature of your script. It’d be quite difficult to launch into a historical script without having read up about the era beforehand, and it would be very unwise to write a biopic without first understanding and selecting elements from the life of the central figure. And whilst there are no hard and fast rules other than to use common sense, you want to give yourself the best chance of finishing your project by planning everything you feel is necessary to the level of detail appropriate. The more you have written, the more you will know how much planning is right for you.
Once the plan is finished, gather together everything that you’ve written down about your idea, all of your resources and research, no matter how incidental it seems to you, and prepare to begin the first draft.
CHAPTER 2

Beginning the journey.

Setting The Scene
The beginning of a script is always a bit of a tentative time. Beginning any self-motivated project that you know will take a lot of time and effort can be very difficult, since it’s also a moment of commitment, a point of no return. It’s also nervy, since how you begin your script will to some extent guide your overall approach. It should also be exciting, a chance to finally stitch together all of the material that you’ve gathered in your preparatory stage and begin the meat of the work.

People have different thoughts about the ideal situations under which you should be working on writing like this. In truth, there’s no ‘ideal scenario’: some people like working in coffee shops, some like to be locked up in their bedroom and others like to be in libraries or museums. Some people can write well anywhere, a rare gift. You’ll have to feel out what is best. It’s only important to consider because, if you feel like you aren’t getting off to a very good start, this could be the reason. Experiment and see what works for you.

Getting Started
To try and undercut all of the weight and tension that you might feel as you start your script you need to lean into a few elements of the writing process itself to help get you going. The first thing to remember is that, by this stage in the process, you ought to already know how your opening scene will look, to some degree. Remember earlier, when we were discussing the difference between an idea and a prospect? One of the tests that you should have done is seeing if you can imagine how the script would begin and end. If you didn’t do that, you should at least have started theorising about it during the ‘nurturing’ stage. All of this is to say that one of the signs you are ready to actually start writing your screenplay is that you can picture how to begin it.

The second tip to rely on is a bit counterintuitive:

Don’t be afraid to write completely freely at the start of your script. It can be damaging to get caught up in perfection at any level: plot, character, structure, even spelling and grammar.
The methodical approach that we discussed in the first chapter of choosing your idea with precision and cultivating it with care is as intense as it is specifically so that you can loosen up and let the pen flow when it comes to actually writing your script. The problem with trying to continue with the scientific method is that creativity rarely prospers in such a controlled environment. Getting started is one of the hardest points in the screenplay and you shouldn’t add to that burden by demanding perfectionism. You need to find a rhythm, slot into the grooves of the tracks that will carry you throughout your screenplay. There’s another reason not to worry too much about holding yourself to the highest level: as we have discovered, the script writing process is a learning one. So, you have to put yourself in the right mindset, open to possibilities, from the very start.

One of the biggest problems experienced by screenwriters is intimidation about their opening scene. We live in a world filled with ‘Once Upon A Time In The West’, ‘Jaws’, ‘La Dolce Vita’ and ‘The Dark Knight’, all of which give writers plenty of reasons to feel insecure about their opening scene. Banish these thoughts from your mind. The perfect opening to your script may not even occur to you until after you’ve finished your first draft. Just write.

**Setting The Standards**

There are certain practices that you ought to be starting from the very first line with the intention of maintaining them throughout your screenplay. One such practice is of recording data.

*At every moment throughout the process of writing you need to be recording everything, from lines that your characters could have said to passing ideas for locations.*

Francis Ford Coppola talks about this concept advising that “The first thing you do when you take a piece of paper is always put the date on it, the month, the day, and where it is. Because every idea that you put on paper is useful to you… One of the most important tools that a filmmaker has are his/her notes.” The same is absolutely true of screenwriting, more so even, since your notes aren’t there only to advise you on what to do but may even contain lines that you can put directly into your screenplay.
The way a script comes together is a fluid process that involves, as we will discover, lots of moving parts, constantly in dialogue with one another. From the first line you put down on the page you ought to be keeping a firm grasp on all of the different elements that live within the world of your screenplay. You never know whether a line that you wrote and then cut because it didn’t fit effectively on page one could be a perfect line for the final page of the whole script. All of the ideas that you generate from the point of starting onwards have value in some way. Whilst keeping track of them, whether that be through sticky notes, voice memos or a simple Word document, can be time consuming and a little tedious, you’ll quickly come to learn the value of this method.

Another good technique to develop from the start of your writing is to visualise the screenplay. Before we get bogged down in real questions of plot structure, this is a simple and satisfying task that involves recording each of your scenes (location, characters present, very brief synopsis) on a digital or physical note of some sort, so that you are able to arrange your scenes form a bird’s-eye perspective. Scenes won’t always end up in the position you write them in, which means that you want to give yourself a way of seeing the shape of the screenplay. As emphasised before, flexibility will be vital as you write and that goes for structure as well, something which is aided by this sort of system.

**The Bottom Line (For Your Opening Line)**

If you’re stuck on your opening, the best thing to do is to:

*clear your mind, stick to your healthy habits and just write.*
CHAPTER 3
Moulding character.

Character Value

Characters in films are like electrical connectors for your screenplay. You can have all sorts of fascinating stories, themes and references flying around you script, but the characters are the aspect that you use to connect an audience with all of those other elements. You’d be very hard pressed to find films that don’t have characters and within the mainstream it’d be impossible. There would even be a theoretical argument to say that no film exists without at least one character, in whatever abstract form that may be.

A lot of the reason that film is so inextricably linked with the idea of characters is because of early film’s roots being so intertwined with late 19th century theatre. At the birth of what we now call ‘movies’, the directors and people working on them were still involved in theatrical communities. In early 20th century classics like ‘La Voyage Dans La Lune’ by theatre director George Méliès, technological restraints meant that cameras filmed at a distance, often filming groups of characters at once. But far from suppressing the idea of character it inspired the performers to triple the size of their performances just so the camera could identify all of their emotions and actions.

Writing character can seem like one of the scariest parts of writing a screenplay. Bringing to life a unique creation through your imagination, is as daunting as it is magical. Regardless of how you feel about the thought of writing a character, you ought to look at it like this:

Character is the sharpest, most efficient tool in your writer’s toolkit for leaving a lasting impression on your audience and linking them to the material that your script is aiming to discuss.

Humans instinctively relate to other humans, which is why the difference between believably written characters and contrived, hollowed-out characters is enormous. It’s also why a great deal of your time as you write will be spent trying to mould the right characters for your story.
Creating The Feedback Loop

The relationship between a writer and their characters is a fascinating one that has been the subject of much theorising, for centuries before filmmaking even began. Shakespeare wrote: “And as imagination bodies forth, The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen, Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing, A local habitation and a name”. Writing characters for a screenplay is both more and less difficult than for a novel, for example. On the one hand, some of the truth of the character is automatically handled by the fact that actors will give a physical form to your writing for the audience to connect to. On the other hand, the ambiguity that’s eliminated in being able to see someone physically as they deliver the lines you’ve written can put a lot of pressure on what you’ve written. Audience members have an innate sense for identifying lines that don’t ring true. Some of that burden is on the actors’ shoulders, but an immense amount of it falls on you, the writer.

As you write your screenplay, you should start to feel that the relationship that you have with your characters evolves. At the start you might have the barest of bones for a character, a pencil sketch: ‘protagonist’s best friend, mid 30s, mixed race, wealthy, stylish but in a muted sense.’ These sorts of sparse details are worth having as you get started because they will further your own visualisation of the character. In other words, there has to be something there to begin with: you can’t make a clay model without first having some clay.

However, over time, as you write more and more, adding greater detail to the world the character lives in, adding more depth to their backstory, you will often find that a strange thing starts to happen.

The more that you give to a character in terms of creating their identity, the more you will begin to feel as if the character starts to develop its own life, independent of your mind. The more the character exists independently of your mind, the more you can look to it for creative inspiration.

This uncanny effect, which we’ll call the ‘feedback loop’, is something of a golden goose for screenwriters. Creating character is so effortful that it’s like a reward for all that you’ve poured in. If you can just get
a character to a rich enough level of reality, then it can start to teach you how it would deal with certain scenarios or what it will order during the breakfast scene in Act 3.

Achieving this degree of synergy with a character also opens your mind to an alternative way of going about writing the script as a whole. It frees you up to write more adventurously in terms of scenarios and themes, because you can rely on the fact that you know how your character(s) will act, regardless of the event. All of this makes generating the feedback loop a powerful asset as you go about your character work within the screenplay.

Back To The Lab

Whilst the scenario above is the ideal situation, it’s time to acknowledge that things aren’t always that easy. Somewhere along the path to reaching the level of richness you need to achieve a beautifully fleshed out character, things can go wrong. Things go wrong for a variety of reasons, from a lack of detail in a character’s backstory to realising that they don’t make total sense in the world that you are putting together. Whatever the issue, here are three potentially helpful techniques for taking a character into the lab and discovering ways in which they can work for your screenplay.

1. **Take your troublesome character out of your screenplay and insert them into a different one altogether.**

   Unless you have several half-finished screenplays lying around, you can replace screenplay with a short story or novel you just read, film you saw last night or any other sort of narrative. The point of the exercise is to get a better look at your character in a new light. So many of the issues screenwriters run into as they work relate to the plot and setting that encase their trouble characters, rather than any sort of lack of detail or problem with the character itself. By putting the character in the context of a new story, you can cross-reference your thoughts on the character to stitch together a three-dimensional image. How would your criminal mastermind behave in an intimate family drama? What does this teach you about their character in the context of your script? You will hopefully find that you learn things about their behaviour from putting them alongside characters alien to their world.
2. ** Entirely replace the character with someone else, to retrospectively justify elements to your original choice.**

One of the most difficult things about creating a character, creating a screenplay at all even, is the problem of possibility. If you're highly creative, as a lot of screenwriters are, then you'll find yourself constantly wondering ‘What if…?’ This question can paralyse you if you’re not careful. In this instance, if you aren’t confident about your choices for a character, you can satisfy your curiosity by entirely altering them as an experiment. The idea is that seeing the negative of your character occupying the same place will help to reveal to you what was right about your decision and help you to see where there may actually be room to make some alterations. You never know, you may find that the direct swap proves to be the perfect solution to your problem.

3. **Workshop characters like actors, testing them together and apart.**

When it comes to casting for a film or TV series, one technique that directors and casting directors particularly like is to workshop their potential cast together. It makes total sense: you want to see whether these people who will spend several months bringing the characters to life together can gel. The same technique can be applied to screenwriting, in a slightly different way. It’s all about creating sparks. What if the protagonist and the mother of the antagonist who we met in Act 1 were suddenly put in a room together alone? What happens? Does that work? Is it interesting or valuable? Why? Why not? You can do this at any point. Worst case scenario you still learn something about the people involved. Best case scenario, you’ve accidentally written a new scene.

**Some Character Tips**

You won’t necessarily feel completely happy with your characters, even after doing all sorts of workshopping and spending enormous amounts of time bringing them to life. That’s just screenwriting for you, it isn’t easy. The crucial thing is that you have the tools at your disposal to deal with any problems that arise and to creatively address all of the myriad of difficulties involved in creating characters.
To send you on your way, here is an additional list of ideas that will help you as you think about character and what to do with your own creations:

1. Release yourself from the shackles of the good guy/bad guy binary. Whilst it makes sense that cinema as a whole would have adopted this, especially in its most unoriginal corners, it makes for boring and predictable films. The most satisfying characters, like Severus Snape from the ‘Harry Potter’ films or Driver from ‘Drive’, are the ones that tap into the ambiguity, the fluctuating, spectrum-like scale of human nature.

2. Your careful, considered approach to writing your protagonist and antagonist must be extended to all characters in your script, no matter how insignificant they seem. Unless it is a specifically made decision for the sake of your plot (like in Peter Weir’s ‘The Truman Show’), it’s never a good idea to create an excellent three-dimensional protagonist but abandon them in a world filled with empty placeholder characters. Everyone who makes it into your script deserves thought, regardless of how many lines they get.

3. In writing your characters, don’t get too caught up in the minutiae of the details. There are a whole list of more important things to worry about than your character’s mother’s middle name or the specific fashion brand that they get their socks from (unless it’s part of a plot point!). You’ll feel happier having a fully fleshed-out script with a protagonist whose name is still Character1, than a character with a name it took you a week to come up with walking around in an empty world.

4. Just like we discussed in relation to planning your script and nurturing your ideas, you need to know where your characters are coming from and where they’re going. Character arcs are as vital as plot arcs, and any sense of aimlessness is a writer missing out on a wonderful opportunity. A good writer will write with subtlety and wit when they know exactly where their character is headed.
5. Relatability is a key concept. Characters that are too desperately trying to be relatable will turn audiences off. A fascinating character is one who seems initially unrelatable, but gradually reveals their humanity. You can still write unrelatable characters, but that should be a choice, used to some effect.

6. When writing your screenplay, always remember that all characters should be justifiable. Including characters because you think they just seem cool but without justification within the context of your story is missing an opportunity for putting in a character who will actually help contribute to what you are trying to achieve.

The Plot Binary
Character and plot are caught in an eternal dance that, as a screenwriter, you will experience first-hand as you write. The one leads to the other and the other leads to the one. It’s often confusing to differentiate between what in your film is plot and what is character. In some ways plot is everything that happens in the film. But in another sense, the characters dictate the plot based on their behaviour. It’s not a question with a clear-cut answer, much like most of the important screenwriting questions. But it does have a big influence on the way you write your screenplay.

After looking so carefully at character, you will have been given clues about the nature of your script, what is important to you as the screenwriter and where your emphasis falls in how you formulate the events of your script. What you will have been examining, without really realising it, is a helpful dual-sided metric for dealing with the issue of ‘purpose’ in your screenplay.

Films can be broken down into two different categories: character films and plot films.

At first glimpse there’s something instinctively wrong with trying to so roughly slice through the middle of the history of cinema. But it serves a purpose to a screenwriter and it makes sense in its own way.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Films</th>
<th>Plot Films</th>
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<td>Character films are films that are driven by storytelling that seeks to explore the life and times of a specific character or group of characters, seeing the world through their eyes and looking at the events that they experience as secondary in focus to how they process them as characters.</td>
<td>Plot films are films that are propelled by events, by the action of the plot. Characterization might be secondary to getting an understanding of the characters’ roles in events. The story is the king in a plot film, with the characters present to make their contributions to the story.</td>
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There are two things worth pointing out at this juncture. Firstly, the divide is not a clean one, with films on both sides that could be argued over to the other. The second point worth making is that this isn’t to say that there aren’t plot driven movies with excellent, richly designed characters, or character films with fascinating, intriguing stories within them. It is simply a question of purpose, a question that is more important to the screenwriter than anyone else in the whole of the rest of the process of bringing the script to life.

*Purpose is an important question for a screenwriter to be continuously examining with regard to all aspects of their screenplay.*

The justification factor is a big reason why purpose is always on the mind of a disciplined screenwriter. Everything in your screenplay has to serve a purpose; identifying that purpose is crucial. You’ll get a sense from all the information you’ve accumulated in your mind as to what sort of script yours is and what purpose you are trying to serve; whether that’s telling a story or exploring a character’s perspective on their world and the events in it.

Structurally, this assessment is also impactful. It’s not set in stone, but there’s a reasonable likelihood that your approach to structuring a character-driven film will be somewhat looser than your approach to structuring a film that is heavily reliant on plot to carry it forward. Telling a story, as all plot-driven films do, often requires a much clearer, more thought-out structure. You’ve probably heard of one of the many different iterations of the cyclical plan for structuring your script, from Joseph Campbell’s ‘Seventeen Stages of the Monomyth’ to Dan Harmon’s ‘Circle Theory of Story’. You can even get templates of these sorts of story structures, which you can lay over your screenplay to see how well your plot points line up. The overwhelming volume of ‘How Tos’ that exist out there can make you think that, if you’re adopting a strict structure for your screenplay, you have to adhere to it unquestioningly. But, whilst you may choose to stick to a system that appeals to you, it is absolutely not a prerequisite.
Don’t compromise your vision for the sake of someone who has never met you or heard your idea has put together.

Try not to yourself on the extreme end of either the structured or unstructured side of the spectrum. Being too regimental about hitting your mark with scene timings can make the script feel robotic. Conversely, if your screenplay reads like a stream of consciousness, you’ll have a hard time getting people to follow along. You ought to be committing to a system of storytelling that falls somewhere on that spectrum where you don’t have to worry about alienating the viewers of the film. A very useful technique is to look up the screenplays of films that you admire that fall into the two different categories. You should easily be able to find examples on both sides that you can look to and learn from as you think about your plot structure and how to proceed with the architecture of your screenplay.

**Trial And Error**

Where the approach to chiselling down to your final characters is much more of a sensorial experience, in which you have to get a feel for what works and what doesn’t, writing scenes, and building your screenplay in general, requires more of a methodical, engineer-like outlook. You will find whilst you write that scenes are surprisingly interchangeable. The order in which you place your scenes is very important but can be easy to experiment with, using trial and error to see how to construct the flow of your screenplay.

*In many ways plot construction is like a puzzle: it takes a lot of time and things will seem wrong right until you crack it.*

You’re trying to get water to flow from one place to another and you have a series of pipes that alter the direction the water flows as you swap them around. The flow is your overall arc, the trajectory of your film narratively, thematically and visually. The individual pipes are your scenes. The flow of the film will halt if it hits a scene that is out of place, which may require a re-write, a removal or, at the very least, a rearrange.
Writing an entire scene which you then have to turn around and remove from your screenplay can seem frustrating, but it’s linked to the fundamental principle of flexibility, something which has come up many times over the last few chapters. In the face of the infinite possible directions your screenplay can take, you have to be prepared for some building and re-building as you tinker with the project on a cellular level. Be aware that even the smallest change in structure has a big impact to the overall feel of the screenplay. Swapping the order of two seemingly unconnected scenes may not seem like a big deal, but from the viewer’s perspective, it will make a tangible difference.

**When Does This Film End?**

The question of screenplay length is an unavoidable one when it comes to discussing plot structure. It’s one of the areas that you have great control over as the screenwriter and how you go about making your decision will make an elemental difference to the experience of watching the resultant film. When you talk to people about screenwriting, particularly industry people, you will be advised that writing a screenplay that falls either side of 90-130 minutes is taking an unnecessary risk. Here’s the most important thing for you to remember in the face of the received wisdom:

*If your story needs 3 hours to be told, then it needs 3 hours. If it can be told in 80 minutes, it should be told in 80 minutes.*

Don’t model your story around a run-time, let the story dictate the run-time.

As a brief qualifier to this advice, if you’re falling off either end of that scale (80mins-180mins) then you do need to pause and think for a second. On the one end, you might have to ask yourself whether you’ve got a short script that is disguising itself as a feature. On the other end, you might be looking at an idea that is simply too large to fit in a feature film.

Beyond this qualification, have a little self-confidence about run-times that seem a bit off the beaten track. There are stellar films at both ends of those run-time limits and, if it’s something you care about, the box office precedent is not a concern. You won’t be taken more seriously by having written an extremely long script, or less seriously for writing a concise, focused one. It’s just a misconception.
Being lenient on yourself about the run-time is definitely distinct from disregarding it altogether. You need to be absolutely on top of the estimates for your screenplay’s run-time. Working from the idea that a page is roughly equal to a minute of screen time is generally safe, but you shouldn’t blindly make the assumption. If your script features a page of directions for an extended car chase, this will impact what length you are able to estimate your script as having. Pay attention to the details of your script so that, when it comes to listing an estimated run time, you can be as accurate as possible. Knowing how long your script is will also allow you to divide it up effectively, something else which is very important for your overall work on structure.

**Scene Justification**

In writing a screenplay, you’ll run into the issue of knowing where you want characters and story arcs to go, but you’ll still be scratching your head about how to get there. It’s an unusual predicament that’s more dangerous than it seems: as soon as writing a scene starts to feel like you’re simply laying down the train tracks that you need to reach your plot destination, things have gone awry. Scenes can’t feel arbitrary, there has to be a narrative logic and a deeply embedded reasoning to each of them. It really just comes back to the issue of justification that we’ve spoken about in regard to so many other aspects to the process of crafting your screenplay. You must to have a disciplined, motivated approach to the planning, inventing and positioning of all of the scenes in your script. Anything less than this and it will feel flabby, weighed down by scenes that aren’t helping the story in any way. Remember the idea of achieving something with every element to the screenplay. If a scene doesn’t do that, then it has to go.
CHAPTER 5

The finisher.

Pre-Destination

So, your plot is flowing, and your plan is being executed to perfection. You’ve workshopped your characters until they’re sharply drawn, believable, three-dimensional figures. You’ve let your creativity carry you through the meat of the plot, but not without justifying every decision along the way. It suddenly dawns on you that you can see the lighthouse in the fog, that all of your hard work may be drawing to a close. But first, there’s the ending.

In a very similar way to the fear that can beset you about the opening of your script, the ending is a bit scary. The brilliance of the endings to films like Sam Mendes’ ‘American Beauty’, Luca Guadagnino’s ‘Call Me By Your Name’ or Quentin Tarantino’s ‘Reservoir Dogs’ might give you reason to doubt yourself. Where the advice for the beginning might be ‘Force yourself to write’, a much more considered approach has to be taken in this instance. Fortunately though, if you’ve listened to any of the advice so far, you should have some idea of where things are headed in your script anyway.

Arcs require a beginning and an end, so you’ll likely have had a few different ideas about the nature of your script’s ending.

Use all of the data you have collected across your script to finely tune and adjust the ending that you envisaged so that anything that has changed about your script during the writing process can be accounted for.

Important Reminders

If you have doubts in your mind about how to end your script, here are a few things to consider:

- The ending is a continuation, not an abrupt halt. You’re carrying through a narrative line till it reaches its natural close, not slamming the lid down on the journey because you’ve hit page 120. A good analogy for this is when a professional musician reaches a ‘rest’ in their music they don’t switch off musically, they play or sing through the silence. The silence after the end of your film should be filled
with the inaudible music of your screenplay.

- A well written script gives you a gift in return for your intense labour. If your characters and plot have been engaging and well-refined, then you will slowly have been accruing a bank of pathos, even without the audience realising it. This your ending will be affecting, simply by virtue of being the end to a well-crafted screenplay.

- There is a right moment for your script to end. It won’t necessarily be immediately apparent unless you’ve got developed a strong connection to your material. What this usually means is that, when you read back your first draft, the ending won’t scan properly. This isn’t automatically an indication that there’s a problem with your ending. You should solve the other problems you have earlier in the script and see what the knock-on effect is on your ending.

- Try not to telegraph that the screenplay is drawing to a close. You have an opportunity to play with the audience’s expectations with your ending to the script. When your last scene has too much of that ‘this is the last scene’ feeling to it, the audience will already be subconsciously packing away their empty popcorn buckets and planning the best route home, even if the ending is strong. The cut to black should be a chance for continued reflection not for immediately walking out of the cinema.

- Make sure to resolve anything that you aren’t keeping intentionally ambiguous. Leaving loose-ends hanging over is frustrating for the audience and seems sloppy or lazy from a writing perspective. If you can’t find a way to effectively close out a certain character arc or plot thread, then you need to rethink the whole thing by going back and assessing why this is the case. Crowbarring an ending in is very noticeable.

- Don’t rely on the audience to become invested in characters that you introduce during the closing stages of the film. It doesn’t matter if you consider your protagonist’s long-lost half-sister essential to the plot, to the audience they are a stranger and they don’t have anywhere near the purchase
that the characters that have been brought to life across the film will have over the audience’s emotions or psychology.

- A sudden ending can be very thought-provoking, even undeservedly so, when executed correctly. Endings that drag on forever always seem overly indulgent and ill-disciplined in a way which can very unhelpfully alienate your audience from the film right when you’re about to part ways with them.

- Eliminate any trace of exposition. This is a big one and getting it wrong will be noticed by even the least critical of moviegoers. A script that gets to the end of its narrative journey and then has to explain itself has failed. If you find yourself doing this then its time for a complete overhaul of what has come before.

- On a related note, be wary of textual epilogues. They’re only appropriate under special circumstances. If you ever write one that is explaining elements related to the plot or the characters, then you’re accidentally begging the question: why isn’t all of this in the actual film?

- When you feel like you’ve got the perfect ending that’s giving you chills just thinking about you should always take it and line it up alongside the opening scene. The cyclical nature to a lot of screenplays, not to mention the huge potential for clever use of foreshadowing, mean that this very simple experiment can bear a lot of fruit.

**Your Last Goodbyes**

The last scene of your screenplay is your final opportunity to speak to your audience. It’s imperative that what you leave them with is very deliberately chosen and that it connects to what the ‘purpose’ of your script really is. A weak ending can completely undo an excellent script, simply because it’s the thing that will be freshest in the minds of the audience. A good ending can make up for misdemeanours earlier in the screenplay and can really transform a moviegoer’s opinion of the whole experience. You have
immense power as a screenwriter crafting the ending to a film but, as cinema itself has taught us, ‘With great power…’

You get the point.
CHAPTER 6
A review.

What Next?
You’ve got a perfectly polished ending that eloquently represents the final destination of all of the various arcs and flows running over your script. You sit back and admire your handiwork. And well you may, it’s no mean feat completing a screenplay. The dedication that you’ve had to show to your task is not to be underestimated. Seeing your job through to the end feels good and it should.

The best thing to do after finishing a complete draft of your screenplay, is to close your laptop / put away your pen, and take some time off.

You could probably do with a break anyway after weeks, months, possibly even years of work. But the real reason to give yourself some time away from the screenplay is perspective. Writing is an immensely insular activity and it’s very easy to get lost in it all. Take a few days off to focus on something else and then come back and read your screenplay beginning to end. Already this will show you things that you need to change, simply by having stepped away. You can tinker with those things for a while, smoothing out any crumples, plastering any cracks. Unfortunately, the review process is difficult, frustrating even, when you try and go at it alone. This is where we come in.

Enter ScriptUp
Ideally, your screenplay will be read by a lot of different people and, eventually, the resultant film will be watched by even more. With this in mind, it’s vital that you seek outside counsel. If you’re taking yourself and the product of your labour seriously enough, you need to be prepared to go deeper than just getting a family member, friend or neighbour to cast an eye over your work.

ScriptUp offers you a service that will give you focused, industry-informed insights on your screenplay as well as expert, unbiased advice over the ins and outs of where your screenplay is succeeding and where it is letting you down. Harnessing a high-quality exterior resource can work very effectively to offset the perspective problems that come with trying to judge the quality of your own script. Not only will the service you receive give you further instruments with which you can go about the polishing that
your script will need before reaching its final form, it will also give you the opportunity to catch errors that will retrospectively seem blindingly obvious.

As the screenwriter, your understanding of the material is unparalleled. Whilst this is an excellent position to be in to write a screenplay, it's also one of the leading reasons why you might take your audience’s comprehension for granted.

You might know the entirety of the childhood back-story of your supporting character, having detailed it fully in your notes. But the way that will read to an outsider will be completely different. Getting script-notes from a professional source like ScriptUp is an excellent way to bridge the gap between your own perception of the story, with the vast well of details that you have syphoned your screenplay out of, and how an audience member will feel as they watch it for the first time.

There's a degree of frustration in this final stage of the screenwriting process, that it’s important you overcome. Finishing the writing stage, given that it represents the meat of the project, can make you feel eager to get things over and done with. The problem is that screenwriting is an immensely competitive field, where it can be very difficult to set your work apart from the crowds. If anything, having gone through the whole arduous, time-consuming writing process means that it's even more important that you give yourself the best possible opportunity by completing the final review stage with as much care as you can. Allow us to take care of some of that responsibility for you by letting ScriptUp guide you as your journey draws to an end.

**The End**

The wonderful thing about a screenplay is that finishing one is both the beginning and the end. It has great value as a standalone piece, but its very existence is demanding further action, to bring it to life through the medium of film.

With all of the work you’ve put in, from first jotting down that fleeting idea for a film all the way to sanding and shining your work with the focus of a master carpenter, you are now able to enjoy
your accomplishment, and see how people react. As a document, it’s teeming with potential. What you choose to do with that potential, is entirely up to you.

Hopefully somewhere in amongst this Writers’ Guide you have found something that inspires, guides or informs you. We certainly hope that you’ve found what you were looking for.

All of us at ScriptUp wish you and your screenplay the very best of luck. And always remember, we’re only a few clicks away.

“For make a great film you need three things - the script, the script and the script.”

-Alfred Hitchcock
Get In Touch

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