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Introduction to Scriptwriting



## Topic 2. Introduction to Scriptwriting

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## 2.1. Why we write?

The following sections will study different aspects of scriptwriting, including formal, theoretical, and job-related issues. They will give the student an overview of the profession of scriptwriter, and will introduce some of the main concepts that future students of scriptwriting will study in depth. Before doing that, it is worthwhile considering the following quotations, taken from different sources (all referenced). They are inspiring and invite the student to reflect upon some of the most relevant aspects of the beautiful art of writing for the screen.

- "The most hardest thing about writing is knowing what to write", Syd Field
- "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you", Maya Angelou
- "There is nothing to writing. All you do is you sit down at a typewriter and bleed", Ernest Hemingway.
- "If you don't have time to read, you don't have the time (or the tools) to write. Simple as that", Stephen King
- "The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug", Mark Twain
- "We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospect", Anaïs Nin
- "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader.", Robert Frost
- "No one is asking, let alone demanding, that you write. The world is not waiting with bated breath for your article or book. Whether or not you get a single word on paper, the sun will rise, the earth will spin, the universe will expand. Writing is forever and always a choice - your choice."  
– Beth Mende Conny
- "Talent is helpful in writing, but guts are absolutely essential."  
– Jessamyn West
- "We write from aspiration and antagonism, as well as from experience. We paint those qualities which we do not possess."  
– Ralph Waldo Emerson

The lines above deal with very important issues for the writer (both for those who write for the screen and for those who work in any other field related to creative writing), such as the NEED to write, the DIFFICULTIES of writing, the existence (or not) of INSPIRATION, the relationship between READING and writing, the debate about the QUALITY (what is good writing and why?), the presence of AUTOBIOGRAPHY in every piece of writing, the relationship between the writer and the READER, the importance of TALENT and its development... and many other, sometimes personal, questions that the student may find on his/her own.

## 2.2. The vocabulary of scriptwriting

This section presents some of the most relevant terms for scriptwriters. It is meant to be an introduction to the terminology that the student will use and develop in future courses, as well as a tool for the first approaches to the experience of writing for the screen. Thus, these very relevant terms are:

2.2.1. Script/ screenplay: both words refer to the book that contains the GUIDE of the final film or show. The fact that it is a guide is of extreme relevance, and the writer must be aware of it during all the stages of the process of writing (which will be presented on section 2.3.).

Scriptwriting is also an ARTFORM. Some people consider it as a literary genre in itself. This means, for instance, that you can read, appreciate and enjoy a script as much as a novel or a poem. This may be arguable and some people may say that only film professionals can say this, but it is still an interesting point for debate.

2.2.2. Scriptwriter: the person who, professionally, writes the script. He or she may work on the different parts of the process (for instance, write just the dialogues), or work on the whole book. Attention should be paid that scriptwriters usually work with other colleagues. This is different from the general practice in other ways of creative writing, such as literature, theatre or poetry, in which the writer tends to work alone.

2.2.3. Narrative: is used in different ways. It can be described as a way of comprehending the relationship between **space**, **time**, and **causality**. In film, narrative is the principle by which information is converted from the frame of the *screen* into a new language or, to put it more simply, the principle by which some facts are filtered, manipulated and changed in order to be delivered to a given audience (readers, spectators...).

2.2.4. Narration: by narration we refer to the distribution of the information that the writer wants to convey, that is to say, how and when the audience receives that information. The difference between narrative and narration is very useful to understand the complex processes of literary creation. It could be said that Narrative is more 'solid' than narration, which could be seen as 'liquid', for it is more malleable.

The following text, taken from the book *Narrative in fiction and film*, by Jakob Lothe, problematizes this question:

## **Narrative text and narrative fiction**

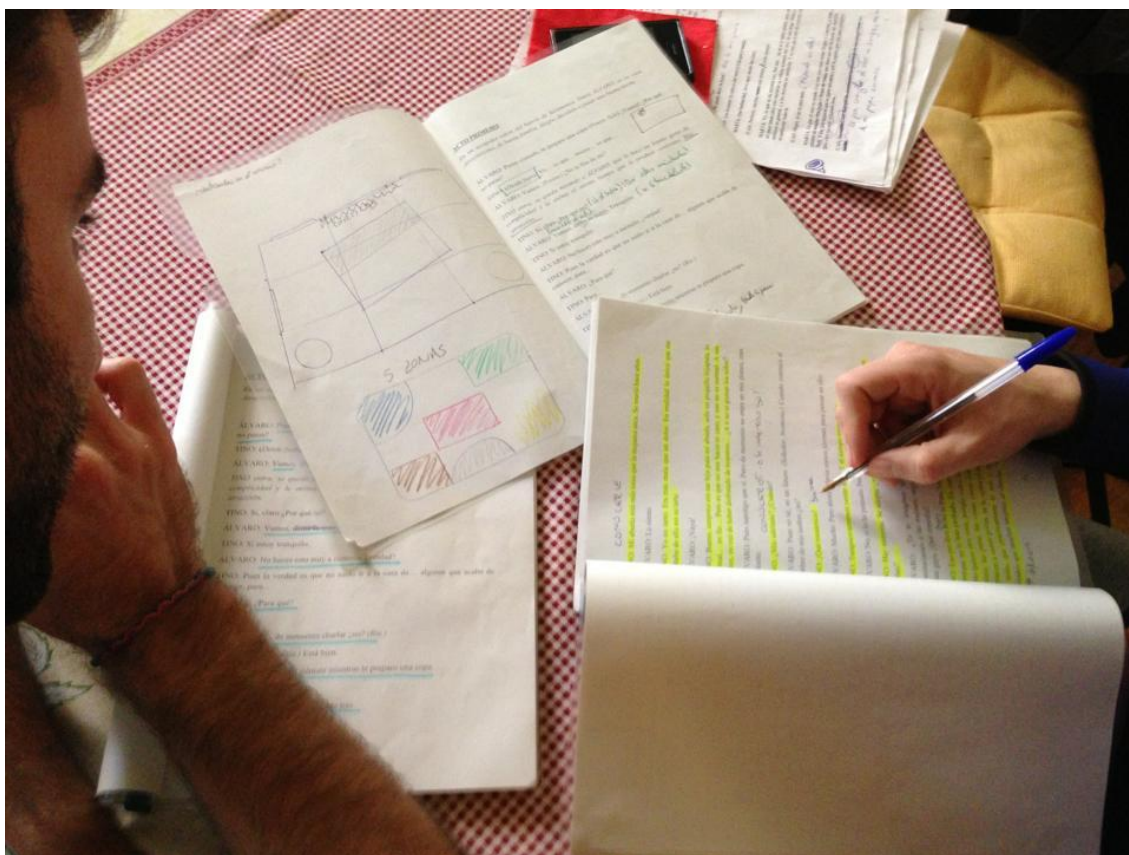
A narrative presents a chain of events which is situated in time and space. There are narratives not only in literature but also in other cultural utterances that surround us. Part of the explanation for the importance of, and our fascination with, narrative lies in the fact that it is fundamental not only to different forms of cultural expression but also to our own patterns of experience and to our insights into our own lives. For instance, our conversations with other people contain narrative sequences—we often report something we have experienced. Our thoughts often assume a narrative form, and even our dreams are like incomplete and confusing stories. Human beings have a deep-seated need to establish narrative patterns, something that is again connected with the tendency we have to see life as a story—a temporally limited line of development from beginning to end, from birth to death, in which we like to find each stage meaningful and to justify the choices we make.

2.2.5. Visualization: this is a very theoretical term that can be used to explain an important moment for scriptwriters. Visualization is the sum of a number of things that are vital for the emergence of the narration, such as inspiration, believing in one's story and, above all, the need to 'see' the narration before, while and after writing it. In other words, the scriptwriter must be able to 'picture' his/her story, as a previous and contemporary step to writing it for, after all, it is a narration that will be filmed. One major implication of visualization is that the writing must be oriented towards the visual. The vocabulary of the scriptwriter aims at presenting the narration as something visual and, if possible, appealing to the eye of the reader, who must, therefore, be treated as a potential spectator.

2.2.6. Re-writing: Writing is re-writing, and the earlier the writer accepts this fact, the better it will be for him/her. Very exceptionally, the first written words will end up in the final text and, even if this happens, the changes in other parts of the text will definitely determine those words. The process of writing must therefore be understood as a continuum. For this very same reason, the final full stop and its appearance is an essential moment. The scriptwriter must be determined enough to decide when to put an end to this process. An unfinished story is not the expected result and, even if it is sometimes difficult to know when to stop, it will always be better to finish than to prolong it forever.

2.2.7 Copyright protection: The protection of one's work is one of the writer's biggest concerns, or must be so. Not taking care of one's right is a big mistake and shows a lack of responsibility that is part of the work of the writer. For many scriptwriters, this may be the less interesting part of the work, and is certainly very far from being creative. But, nevertheless, one should only consider a script to be finished once it has been registered on the appropriate Intellectual Property Office. Legislation varies according to the country and time period, but there are always ways to make sure that one's work is properly secured. In Spain, the so-called "Registro de la propiedad intelectual" has been helping writers for many years and is easily accessible. Recently, new sites on the Internet have started

offering alternate (and, often, free-of-charge) ways to register scripts, and even synopsis, storyboards, etc...



The script is a guide for everyone who works on the film. This includes actors, the director, the make-up people, cinematographers... Thus, the scriptwriter must find the ways to present all the relevant information that these people will need.

Picture copyright: Alejandro Melero

## 2.3. The stages of scriptwriting

There are as many strategies to write a script as there are writers and scripts. Having said that, it must be admitted that some strategies have been working for many years, and it is convenient, especially for new-comers, to follow the traditions initiated and developed by the masters of this job. Traditionally, thus, the steps outlined below have been helping many writers. It is advisable that students who approach the craft of scriptwriting for the first time pay attention to the peculiarities of each step, and try to follow it as close as possible for their exercises.

2. 3.1. Idea. This could be seen as the "Zero level" of writing. However, to have an idea is very far from implying that the writer has something to say. The idea should be expressed in one single line. For example, something like "The love story of a young lady from the upper classes and a young rascal, in the changing world of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, who find themselves in the tragedy of the titanic" could be one way to express the idea behind the much-popular film *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1996). Fernando Fernán Gómez, who excelled both as a writer of films and books (as well as director, actor, etcetera) claimed that "it is not only not advisable to have a great idea for a film, but it can be in fact very dangerous for the final result". These words suggest that an idea which could look very promising can turn out a poor script.

2. 3.2. Synopsis: after some thinking about the idea, there should be a moment in which the scripwriter is able to develop it a little bit further and reach a synopsis, which is a short summary of the story, or, rather, of the beginning of the story. The synopsis should include the most relevant points of the story (at least, the points that, at this stage, look like the most relevant ones, even if this may change). Also, the main characters must be clearly outlined. After reading the synopsis, a reader who is not familiar with the story should be able to know the themes of it. The length of the synopsis will depend, surely, on the project. It can be just one paragraph, or maybe a whole page.

2. 3.3. Treatment: the treatment is a step which is only part of the creative writing process for the screen, that is, unlike the idea or the synopsis, writers of novels do not normally go through the treatment stage (although some wirters of comic books, for instance, may find the Treatment a very useful tool). Basically, the treatment is the description of the whole story, from beginning to end, with descriptions of all or nearly all the characters, and especial attention to the most significant events and parts of the story. A good way to understand what the treatment is, and its importance in the process of scriptwriting, is considering it as a narration of the film to someone who cannot see. This way, the writer will realize what the most important pieces of information are, and which ones can be left for later. This narration must be fluid, read well, and will prove very useful for the following step. Once the writer has the treatment, a very important part of the final project has been done, and the writer will realize that s/he is not too far from seeing the results of his/her work. Also, some of the biggest problems will have been solved, making thus the next step more fluid. Seeing the treatment as

something very provisional or, at least, more provisional than the next step, will help the writer. The most important lines can be incorporated in the treatment (possibly, between bracket

2. 3.4. Step-outline or scene-by-scene breakdown. This is what will be called the SCRIPT, and has a precise style that will be dealt with in the following section. It consists of the breaking down of the Treatment. Each different relevant part of the treatment will be a Scene or Sequence. Sometimes, the writer will notice that each paragraph of the treatment is a scene, although this will surely vary depending on the project and the writing style.

Very importantly, the Script will contain the dialogues. The writing of the dialogues is an essential part and will consume a huge part of the overall process. To write the dialogues, the writer must know the characters very well. The art of writing dialogues is a complex one and requires a combination of talent, experience and, certainly, the ability to use one's observation of the world and knowledge.

(2. 3.5). Storyboard. The storyboard is the graphic representation of the most relevant shots of the film. This is not part of the sriptwriter's job, but some scriptwriters will want to use it as a help. If the scriptwriter is going to direct his/her one script, the storyboard will be very helpful and does not necessarily have to come as the fifth step. Not being good at drawing is not an excuse for not doing a storyboard, as it is more a representation of the shots than a final artistic product.



## 2.4. The three-act plot structure

The idea that all stories should follow a three-act structure was first developed by Aristotle, and is still supported by most theorists of narrative writing. This fact only is sufficient to understand the legitimacy of this theory. The three-act structure is not only about writing per se, but is actually the representation of the very circle of life and nature. All things around us, human or not, follow a three-step cycle. The lives of animals and plants, the very way we structure our thoughts, the processes of responses to different stimuli... can be divided into three different stages which would follow, more or less, the idea that there is a beginning, a middle and an end. This certainly applies to all forms of story telling. A joke, a phone conversation, a formal or informal request... no matter how desorganised they are, if they have a narrative (that is, if they have a story to tell), there should be a beginning or presentation of the story, a middle or development of it, and a conclusion.

In the following lines, the main characteristics of the three-plot structure, as applied to film, are outlined. The example used here is the aforementioned *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1996), a film that most students will probably know. It is suggested that this model is applied to other popular films, such as Disney's cartoons, the *Star Wars* saga, et cetera, in order to see how this model finds a very easy application.

2.4.1. Act I. Also known as Presentation, Introduction or, simply, Beginning. This is the part in which the following information is presented: 1) the main characters should be introduced and spectators should be able to know a lot about their personalities, the way they respond to difficulties, their social status, their relationship with other, secondary, characters. The place and time in which your story takes place should also be clearly presented. No major conflicts, though, appear in this first act, usually. Thus, in *Titanic*, during the first act we meet Rose and Jack, our protagonists, and learn to like them, while we see the difficulties posed by their relationship. We also see the other characters, their social status (the differences between the upper and lower classes, which will determine the following acts).

2.4.2. Act II. Also known as Middle, Development, Centre, Core... This act comes right after a big event that makes everything seen before (in the presentation) be in danger or about to change. Thus, in *Titanic*, when the ship hits the iceberg, new events are to come and nothing will ever be the same. In other words, there is no way back after that huge event. In this second act, everything that had been presented earlier is seen from a new perspective. The characters that we met face challenges that, albeit new, must be connected to events or features of their personalities that had been presented in the first act. The events of this second act should follow the following structures: conflict-resolution. And, therefore, the second act can be prolonged as long as the scriptwriter wants to, as new conflicts and resolutions can be thought of. Thus, in *Titanic*, we see Jack and Rose escaping from several difficulties; they are trapped in a corridor and, once they are able to

escape (after opening the iron gates), they have to find a boat, see where Rose's relatives are, etcetera.

2.4.3. Act III. Also known as Resolution, Conclusion or, simply, End. This act arrives after another big event, possibly bigger than the one which took us from act I to act II. Again, the event must be so important and big that it must clearly be perceived as a point of no return, making everything that we have seen in both act I and II be in danger again. The best events are those that are surprising for the spectator while, at the same time, make him/her feel that they were bound to happen from the beginning. In *Titanic*, this event is Rose's decision to stay in the ship and not escape in one of the boats that, being a member of the upper classes, she is entitled to use. After this, herself as a character and her relationship with Jack, are strongly marked, and will determine the resolution of the film.

The writer must make sure that all the conflicts presented during the second act are resolved here. Equally, the scriptwriter must be very careful to present a nice good-bye to all the main characters.