

Writing Your Script

Once you have an idea and a pitch, you can begin the process of writing your script. Your script will have a different format depending on whether you are making a documentary or a fictional film. As all scripts can be detailed and complex documents, with lots of different elements, it is a good idea to write your ideas down and arrange them into outlines and a treatment before writing the script itself.

The Short Outline

Write one sentence for your beginning (the *inciting incident* which leads eventually to the *crisis* and *climax* occurring), one sentence for the *middle* and one sentence for the *end*. Does it flow? Can you see the logical connection between the parts?

Now break the story down into its individual parts.

Step Outline

Break your story into individual scenes and write out a one-sentence description of what happens in each scene, then give each scene a number. The idea here is to decide how best to tell your story (we can say that the *story* is what happens, the *plot* is how you tell the story).

- Do all the events happen in chronological order?
If in writing out the plot of the story, you may find it easier if your events happen in chronological order, but you can also reorder the scenes after they have been laid out. You can also add new scenes if you find gaps in the storyline.
- Each scene should be about one idea
Make sure each scene works to bring out one aspect of your story. The point is to have every event driving your story forward.

Writing a Treatment

The treatment, sometimes called a synopsis, is the master plan or project description for the video. It is a fairly detailed summary of plot, actions, characters, and locations, but for most films less than an hour, it should be no more than a page in length. The treatment is the written record of the plans, creative process, and strategies for visualizing and sequencing the ideas in the movie. It should not be viewed as final, inflexible, or complete - rather it is a method for accomplishing ideas.

The Format of your Script

Scripts for both documentaries and fiction follow formats which make it easy for everyone using the script to follow what is happening in each scene.

- **Documentary Scripting**

Documentaries are often developed by beginning with an outline, listing the main points to be covered. Then the people, locations and activities that most vividly represent the idea and point of view must be chosen. The script of a documentary can be written by dividing the page down the centre — on the left, the image/video is listed, and on the right, the sound/dialogue is listed. The heading, which can be underlined, notes the scene number, time (day or night), and location. The shots to take in the scene are listed beneath. For example, if an interview is being shot, the interview and the name of the person can be listed on the left. On the right, the questions that will be asked can be listed.

When conducting an interview, an appropriate place, such as the interviewee's work place or a place where they are in the process of doing a typical activity, must be chosen. This will help the audience feel like they really know them. The locations should add insight to the viewers's understanding of the person's character, where they live, and what they are familiar with. The location should help lend a greater awareness of the subject of the video.

Before the interview, a list of questions that are most important to have answered in the video should be prepared. Questions should stimulate a more lengthy response — not just a "yes" or "no" — around the issues to be raised in the videotape. Another interview technique is to ask the subject to include the question in the beginning of their response. If they do this, when the tape is edited, their response will be self-explanatory. To achieve "true to life" interviews, the subject also should be as comfortable as possible.

The scripting for a music video and its combination of images can be notated the same way as the documentary scripting process just discussed. For example, in the music video format, images can be listed on the left-hand side of the column, and specifically juxtaposed next to lyrics of the music on the right-hand side of the script, creating a written plan for image and sound reference.

- **Narrative Scripting for Fiction**

Dramatic scripts are written more like a play: the writer makes a heading noting the scene number, whether the action takes place in an interior (INT) or exterior (EXT) location, day or night, and the location designation. Then he/she notes a few lines

describing the action taking place. If characters speak, their names are written down, underlined, and their dialogue is written below. Whenever the time or location changes, there is a new scene and the same script-writing process begins again, noting the time and place, the actions, the characters, and their dialogue.

At the end of the scene, the writer often notes the transition, which describes how one scene will lead to another. When we watch films, we notice that sometimes the transition will involve a special effect, such as a dissolve from the last shot of one scene to the first shot of another, or a fade to black from the last scene to a fade up from black in the following scene. Other times a transition has been planned in the script that involves the relationship of a specific action, image or sound from one scene to the next. These transitions are especially effective if limited technology is available for creating special effects. Successful transitions are based on careful work in the planning phase, by visualizing how the transition will work and writing it into the script or storyboard, even if these transitions are refined or even changed at the editing stage once the shooting is completed.

Writing Narration

It is most effective to let the characters speak for themselves, whether they are real people (in interviews for documentaries) or fictional portrayals (in a fictional narrative). Because you are working in a visual medium, an image is often as effective as many words. But if the images and the people's words are not enough to articulate a specific point to be conveyed, a point or a process may be illustrated by providing narration or voice-over (VO). Narration functions like the voice of an omnipresent storyteller, or authority, guiding the viewer through the script, filling in where the images and dialogue cannot. The narration should be written into the script, labeled as narration or VO.

Including Archival and Off-the-Air Material in the Script

Pre-existing footage, such as images and sounds that are possibly historic or far beyond limited resources to shoot, can also be added to the video production. This footage can be acquired from stock footage or archival footage libraries, although the cost is usually prohibitive. Off-the-air footage can also be recorded through a VCR or pre-recorded videos, as footage is re-used or "appropriated" from the mass media.

A note of caution:

When using pre-existing footage or music for broadcast, legal copyright clearance, or the right to use it, **must** be obtained, and this is usually incredibly expensive. If a short excerpt is used for the purposes of critique, review, study, or news reporting, you may be protected under the legal clause known as "fair dealing" (often referred

to as "fair use". which is the American term for it). Canadian copyright laws were developed before our current digital media technologies that allow easy file sharing, image manipulation and production. You can keep track of current copyright legislation in Canada on the federal Canadian Intellectual Property Office website at: (http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/sc_mrksv/cipo/cp/cp_main-e.html).

The best advice us always to err on the side of safety and not to use copyrighted images or music, including melodies as well as lyrics.

The First Draft

The first draft is about taking your rough ideas and outlines to create a screenplay that your actors and crew can work with.

Begin with an image, not dialogue.

It's been said that the opening shot will sum up the theme of the whole film. Your opening image and your closing image are extraordinarily important. The closing image is what the audience takes away with them.

Consider the use of images as story-telling devices in your favourite films. Even when there is a lot of dialogue, it is certain images at crucial points in the film that you remember. In a mainstream film with lots of dialogue like *Titanic* (1997), it is certain images — the main characters at the prow of the ship for instance — that are the most memorable and also capture the mood, emotions and the characters' relationship in a way that dialogue couldn't.

Your script will also contain dialogue. Some of your step outline points may have notes in them saying "The two kidnappers argue about who was supposed to pack the rope," and now is the time to put the words to these scenes.

You have all your scenes, you know what's going to happen and to whom, when, and why. Now you have to make that come alive. You might as well begin at the beginning.

Practical Issues to Consider:

- Length — one page in your script = one minute on screen
- Locations — what is the availability/practicality of where you want to shoot?
- Cast — how many actors are available to you?
- Props — what realistically can you use, make or buy?