

Narrative Scriptwriting

Instructor: Jefferson McClure



Introduction:

In this three-part series, you will craft your own screenplay for a scene for a narrative film. You will learn everything that goes into creating a script, from the theoretical to the practical. We hope you will walk away from this class with not only the script for your scene, but the confidence and knowledge to create many more in your future!

Class One

Overview:

In this first class, we will introduce everyone to the basic structure and content of screenplays. We will read some examples and watch how screenplays, written on paper, translate to the film medium.

Agenda:

1. Course goals and expectations - John
2. How do you write a film? - Jefferson
 - a. Why are you writing a film?
 - b. Who are you writing for?
 - c. Write only what can be seen or heard!
 - d. The script is just the beginning
3. Examples - words on page make the scenes happen
 - a. Unforgiven - English Bob in jail
 - i. [Link](#) - search for "Duke of Death" to find scene starting at 53:40 and 1:00:21
 - ii. Roles get reversed, Beauchamp discovers real story
 - iii. Power dynamic flips
 - iv. Sets up rest of movie
 - v. Little Bill is set up as a decent person but also villain
 - b. Inglorious Basterds opening scene
 - i. [Link](#) - beginning scene
 - ii. Suspense, audience has more knowledge
 - iii. Very long
 - iv. Character building for villain
 - v. Setting
4. The Basics: Plot, Setting, Characters, and Story Arc (Jefferson)
 - a. Plot
 - i. Structural versus emotional plot
 1. Structural - facts of the plot

2. Emotional plot - what the story is really about (i.e., redemption)
 3. Discussion: Structural/emotional plots of specific movies (i.e., Finding Nemo, Memento)
- b. Setting
- i. Why are we in this place?
 - ii. How does the place affect what is going on?
 - iii. Discussion: Name a movie where setting played a key role?
- c. Characters
- i. Different voices for different characters
 1. How do they walk?
 2. How do they talk?
 3. What makes them unique?
 4. Give each actor something to do
 5. Diversity - race, class and gender
 - a. No more lame female/minority tropes! Give them depth!
 - b. [@FemScriptIntros](#)
 6. Discussion: Name some of your favorite movie/TV characters? What makes them great?
- d. Story Arc
- i. [Freytag's Pyramid](#)
 1. Exposition - important background information
 2. Rising action - series of events that build up to climax
 3. Climax - turning point, which changes protagonist's fate
 4. Falling action - unraveling the conflict
 5. Denouement - normality is restored
 - ii. Syd Field's 3 Act Paradigm
 1. Set Up (1-30)
 2. Plot Point 1
 3. Confrontation (30-90)
 4. Plot Point 2
 5. Resolution (90-100)
 - iii. Blake Snyder's Beat Sheet
 1. Opening Image (1)
 2. Theme Stated (5)
 3. Set-Up (1-10)
 4. Catalyst (12)
 5. Debate (12-25)
 6. Break into Two (25)
 7. B Story (30)
 8. Fun and Games (30-55)
 9. Midpoint (55)
 10. Bad Guys Close In (55-75)
 11. All Is Lost (75)

- 12. Dark Night of the Soul (75-85)
 - 13. Break into Three (85)
 - 14. Finale (85-110)
 - 15. Final Image (110)
 - iv. Pulp Fiction - each character has their own story arc, knitted together in a full movie
5. Become an idea generator
- a. Every day write 3 lists: what baffles you, what pisses you off, what keeps you up at night - find common themes
 - b. Write for 10-minutes nonstop - whatever pops into your head, write it down! Don't worry about it making sense, grammar, or spelling
 - c. Read old newspaper [headlines/articles](#)
 - d. Resources
 - i. Story generator apps
 - ii. Books with writing exercises (Write Starts, The Writer's Daily Companion, The 3 a.m. Epiphany)
 - iii. Go Into the Story - [A Story Idea Each Day for a Month](#)
6. Treatments & Loglines
- a. What is a treatment?
 - i. Treatment – A formal marketing piece to showcase your story. The goal is for the reader to say, “Send me your script!”
 - ii. First and foremost, a treatment is designed as a marketing piece that is meant to sell your concept. It should be clear, concise, to the point, and grabbing. A scene-by-scene analysis nor thesis statement is necessary for your treatment, however certain elements of importance for the film should be communicated in the writing. Prose style is recommended for treatment writing, and technical details such as audience or budget should not be discussed.
 - iii. [Logline](#) - the importance of summing up your movie in one sentence
 - b. Example - Treatment for *Wedding Crashers*

Logline: This story is about growth into love from youthful indiscretion.

Divorce mediators John Beckwith and Jeremy Grey are business partners and lifelong friends who share one truly unique springtime hobby – crashing weddings! Whatever the ethnicity of the wedding party--Jewish, Italian, Irish, Chinese, Hindu—the charismatic and charming duo always have clever back stories for inquisitive guests and inevitably become the hit of every reception, where they strictly adhere to their proven rules of wedding crashing to meet and pick up women aroused by the very thought of marriage. At the tail end of another successful season of toasting brides and grooms, Jeremy learns that the daughter of Treasury Secretary William Cleary and his wife, Kathleen, is

getting married in what is sure to be the Washington D.C. Social event of the year. After infiltrating the lavish affair, John and Jeremy quickly set their sights on two bridesmaids, Claire and Gloria Cleary. With the lavish reception in full swing, Jeremy works his game plan to perfection in seducing Gloria, but John's flirtation banter with Claire is unexpectedly impeded by her pompous, Ivy League boyfriend Sack. Having uncharacteristically fallen hard and fast for Claire, John convinces a resistant Jeremy to bend the crashing rules and accept an invitation to an extended weekend party at the Cleary family compound. Once at the palatial waterfront estate, John and Jeremy endure a multitude of comical mishaps at the hands of the dysfunctional members of the Cleary family, but also learn a few unexpected lessons about love and relationships.

Assignment:

Please write a treatment for the script you would like to write.

Include:

1. Title
2. Logline (one-liner telling what your script is about)
3. Introduction to main characters
4. Setting or unique features
5. Brief plot synopsis (think three acts or beginning, middle and end) We will present our treatments in front of the class next week.

Class Two

Overview:

In this second class, we will present our treatments to the class. We will also go more in-depth into the underlying structures of screenplays, as well as character development and dialogue. We will also teach you how to use a free online scriptwriter that makes formatting easy.

Agenda:

1. Pitch treatment and feedback
2. Exercises in class:
 - a. Warm up:
 - i. Images
 1. What's happening in this scene? (15 mins.)
 - b. Character Development
 - i. Write out your character's name, age, background, present, goals, dreams, inner dialogue
 - ii. Find a partner and have the partner [interview](#) you as your character (15 min)
3. [Formatting](#) - sample scripts [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)
 - a. Scene heading, action, character name, parentheticals, transitions
 - b. Each scene starts with either EXT. or INT. (exterior/interior), the location, then time of day (ie: INT. BAKERY -- DAY)
 - c. Next describe what is seen. Do not put camera direction in.

- d. First time you mention a character their name needs to be in ALL CAPS followed by their age and a brief description.
 - e. Dialogue & action
 - i. On-the-nose dialogue vs subtext (see example)
 - ii. Action - present tense, only what is seen and heard - not what people are thinking.
 - iii. Don't use adverbs - use singular, vivid action words (Yay: saunter, stroll, meander. Nay: walked slowly)
 - iv. Example of action from Juno:

Juno examines a large ad in the newspaper that depicts a distraught TEEN GIRL clutching her head in a moment of staged conflict. The ad reads: "Pregnant? Find the clinic that gives women choice. Women's Choice Health Center."

Juno picks up her hamburger phone and dials. For a moment, she attempts to copy the melodramatic pose from the ad, checking herself out in the mirror.
4. Exercises
- a. [Vivid verbs](#)
 - b. Eavesdrop on conversation at coffee shop, record conversation amongst friends - transcribe to script form to see how people actually talk.
 - c. Transcribe your favorite TV show.
5. Free (or inexpensive) scriptwriting software
- a. [Celtx](#)
 - b. [WriterDuet](#)
 - c. [Fountain apps](#)

Assignment:

Please write one scene from your film.

Class Three

Overview:

In the third class, we will focus on hands-on editing, writing, workshopping, and brainstorming. We will read and workshop our first scenes, listen to a brief lecture on how to edit effectively, and then proceed to finish the class by brainstorming new directions for our scripts.

Agenda:

1. Reading of scenes and feedback
2. Overcoming obstacles
 - a. Time - creative habits
 - b. Writer's block
 - c. Confidence issues
 - i. Improv classes
 - ii. Tick-tock exercise, negative thoughts replaced with positive (from [Thinkertoys](#))
3. Writing Practices

- a. Watch movies/documentaries/TV series/web series
 - b. Read film/TV reviews
 - c. Read scripts
4. Distribution/selling (Nicole)
- a. Find the producer and get them to ask you for the script; producers are the ones who buy scripts
 - b. Or, have a great producer there with you: It can be you or another person. This person is passionate about your script, knows your audience, knows the story and will commit to being there every step of the way. They will manage the process from start to finish.
 - c. Have a great pitch and logline: This is your elevator speech. You'll want to take your treatment and condense it to a 30 sec - 1min. pitch. People are approached often to read scripts and make films out of them. You need to be clear and concise when you're delivering your story to be told.
 - d. Marketing: Know your story and know your audience. Also, develop your online presence as a legit writer (imdb.com profile, blogging, etc.)
 - e. Network: With other writers, producers, filmmakers, content creators
 - f. Gatherings: Research local events where these people might be. Look at meetups (film, writing, storytelling). Reach out to the DOM member community. Create these events yourself.
 - g. Festivals: Research festivals in your area, with your genre, with an audience you'd want to see your film. This can get pricey so do the research and see if there's a value in attending/screening your film there. Look at the distributors that will be there and past success of previous attendees.
5. Important trade publications
- i. Indiewire.com
 - 1. [Filmmaker Toolkit](#)
 - ii. Variety
 - iii. Screendaily.com
 - iv. Hollywood Reporter
 - v. Vulture
6. Web Sites (Nicole)
- a. Writer's Guild of America wga.org
 - b. Moviebytes.com
 - c. Withoutabox.com
 - d. Copyright
 - e. Imdb.com
 - f. The Daily Script dailyscript.com
7. Independent production (John)
- a. DOM classes
 - b. Connecting with indie filmmakers
 - i. Emerging Filmmakers Project (Bug Theatre)
 - ii. Open Screen Night

- iii. F.I.N.D. Film Industry Networking Denver
 - iv. CFVA Colorado Film and Video Association
 - v. Women in Film and Media Colorado (WIFMCO - next meeting June 22nd!)
 - vi. Sie Film Center (volunteering, events, classes)
 - vii. [Series Fest](#) June 27 - July 2
- c. Festival circuit
 - d. Consider shorts as well as full-length
8. One-on-one time

Thank you for attending our three-part series on Narrative Screenwriting. We hope you enjoyed the classes! Please feel free to reach out to JohnA@OpenMediaFoundation.org with any questions, feedback, or additional materials.

