

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO CRAFTING YOUR DEBUT FILM

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# WRITING YOUR FIRST SHORT SCREENPLAY

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SCREENWRITERS COLLECTIVE



A comprehensive guide for aspiring writers in NWA

# WRITING YOUR FIRST SHORT SCREENPLAY

A simple, practical, slightly less terrifying guide to writing a movie

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## So... You Want to Write a Movie?

First of all: **congratulations.**

You have an idea.

Maybe it's a funny idea. Maybe it's scary. Maybe it's heartbreaking. Maybe it's something you've been thinking about for years.

Or maybe you just thought, *"I could probably write a better movie than that."*

Either way, you're in the right place.

Writing a screenplay can seem intimidating because screenplays have rules. There are strange-looking pages, scene headings, dialogue formatting, action lines, and people telling you that a screenplay should be exactly 117 pages.

**Forget all of that for now.**

You're writing a **short film.**

That means you have an enormous advantage: **you don't need 117 pages.**

## START SMALL

For your first short screenplay, aim for somewhere around:

**5–15 pages.**

A general rule of thumb is:

**One screenplay page equals roughly one minute of screen time.**

So a 10-page script will probably become a film somewhere around 10 minutes long.

It won't be exact. Some pages will play quickly. Others may take much longer.

But it's a useful starting point.

And here's an important piece of advice:

## **YOUR FIRST SHORT SHOULD BE SMALL.**

Really small.

You probably don't want:

"A group of astronauts crash-land on Mars, discover an alien civilization, overthrow an evil dictator, and save Earth."

Not for your first film.

Instead, think:

"A woman finds a note on her windshield that says, 'I know what you did.' She has no idea what it means."

Now you have a movie.

Or:

"Two brothers sit in a diner waiting for someone who never arrives."

Or:

"A teenager discovers that the elderly man next door has been secretly filming her house."

Or even:

"A guy accidentally sends a breakup text to the wrong person."

Short films work beautifully when they focus on **one interesting situation**.

## **THE BIG QUESTION**

Before you write anything, try finishing this sentence:

**"My movie is about..."**

Not the entire plot.

Just the basic idea.

For example:

My movie is about a lonely man who receives a birthday card from his dead wife.

That's enough to start.

Now ask yourself:

**What happens next?**

And then:

**What happens after that?**

And eventually:

**What happens at the end?**

You don't need everything figured out yet.

But you should have some idea where you're going.

Because writing a screenplay without knowing where you're going is a little like getting into a car and saying:

"Let's see where this thing takes us."

It can be exciting.

It can also end with you driving into a lake.

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## **THE THREE THINGS EVERY SHORT FILM NEEDS**

You don't need explosions.

You don't need expensive locations.

You don't need famous actors.

But most good short films have three things:

### **1. A CHARACTER**

Someone we care about.

### **2. A PROBLEM**

Something that character wants, needs, fears, or has to deal with.

### **3. A CHANGE**

Something is different by the end.

That change can be enormous.

Or incredibly small.

A man might finally forgive his father.

A woman might discover her husband is cheating.

A child might realize the monster under the bed isn't actually a monster.

Or someone might simply decide:

**I'm going to make the phone call.**

That's a story.

**Your Character Wants Something**

Here's one of the simplest ways to create a story:

**Give someone something they want.**

Then put something in the way.

Imagine:

Sarah wants to ask her boss for a raise.

Okay.

That's not exactly a blockbuster.

But now let's make things worse.

Sarah needs the raise because her apartment rent just increased.

Better.

Now her boss has scheduled a meeting with her.

Great.

Except Sarah discovers that her boss is about to fire her.

Now we have a movie.

The basic formula is:

**CHARACTER + WANT + OBSTACLE = STORY**

Your character wants something.

Something gets in the way.

They have to do something about it.

## **WANT VS. NEED**

There's another useful concept:

**What your character wants isn't always what your character needs.**

For example:

A man wants to win back his ex-wife.

But what he actually needs is to accept that the relationship is over.

A teenager wants to become popular.

But what she needs is to stop pretending to be someone she's not.

A detective wants to solve a murder.

But what he needs is to admit that he made a terrible mistake.

You don't have to build some complicated psychological masterpiece.

Just give your character a reason to **do something**.

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## **GIVE YOUR CHARACTER A DECISION**

One of the easiest ways to make a short film interesting is to give your character a choice.

For example:

**A woman discovers \$10,000 in cash in a taxi.**

What does she do?

That's the movie.

She can:

- Keep it.
- Turn it in.
- Try to find the owner.
- Spend some of it.
- Pretend she never found it.

Now you're writing.

The audience wants to know:

**What will she choose?**

And more importantly:

**Why?**

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## DON'T WRITE A BIOGRAPHY

Beginning writers often spend a lot of time figuring out their character's entire life story.

Where were they born?

What was their first pet?

What was their GPA?

What happened to their third-grade teacher?

You don't need all of that.

You need to know the things that matter **to this story**.

If your character is afraid of water, that's useful if the story involves a swimming pool.

If your character's mother died when she was six, that's useful if the story involves her mother.

If your character loves collecting vintage spoons...

Well, maybe that's useful too.

But don't feel obligated to tell us.

## YOUR CHARACTER IS NOT THEIR RESUME.

We don't need to know everything about them.

We just need enough to become interested in them.

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## THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION

Before writing your screenplay, ask:

**Why should I care what happens to this person?**

If you can't answer that, keep working on the character.

You don't have to make them likable.

You just have to make them **interesting**.

A terrible person can be a fascinating character.

A wonderful person can be incredibly boring.

Your job is to make us curious.

**The Screenplay Is Not the Movie**

This is one of the biggest things new writers have to understand:

**A screenplay isn't a novel.**

You aren't writing what the audience should imagine.

You're writing what the audience can **see and hear**.

Instead of:

John feels incredibly lonely and begins thinking about all the mistakes he's made in his life.

Try:

John sits alone at the kitchen table.

Across from him is an empty chair.

He places two plates on the table.

Then he stops.

He slowly removes one.

You didn't tell us John was lonely.

**We saw it.**

That's screenwriting.

**WRITE WHAT WE CAN SEE.**

Instead of:

Maria is nervous.

Write:

Maria checks the clock.

Checks the door.

Checks the clock again.

Instead of:

David is furious.

Write:

David smiles.

Then:

He calmly puts down the phone.

Then:

**CRACK.**

He punches the wall.

Let the audience figure out what he's feeling.

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## **DON'T OVERWRITE**

Screenplays are supposed to be **easy to read**.

Don't fill the page with giant blocks of text.

Instead of:

John walks into the room and looks around carefully before noticing that there is a strange sound coming from somewhere behind the refrigerator, which causes him to become concerned because he remembers that the refrigerator was making strange noises earlier that morning...

Try:

John enters.

He stops.

**A strange noise.**

Behind the refrigerator.

John listens.

Much easier.

## **SHORT PARAGRAPHS.**

A screenplay should have lots of white space.

That makes it feel fast.

It also makes it easier for actors, directors, producers, and everyone else to read.

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## **SCENE HEADINGS**

Every new scene begins with a scene heading.

It generally looks like this:

**INT. KITCHEN – NIGHT**

INT. means **interior**.

EXT. means **exterior**.

Then you tell us where we are and roughly when it is.

For example:

**EXT. HIGH SCHOOL PARKING LOT – DAY**

**INT. MOTEL ROOM – NIGHT**

**EXT. WOODS – LATER**

That's basically it.

You don't need to make this complicated.

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## **ACTION**

Under the scene heading, describe what we see.

For example:

**INT. DINER – NIGHT**

Jack sits alone in a booth.

A WAITRESS approaches.

**WAITRESS**

Coffee?

Jack shakes his head.

She notices the untouched piece of birthday cake in front of him.

That's a screenplay.

Notice that the action isn't explaining everything.

It's giving the reader enough information to **see the movie**.

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## **DIALOGUE**

When someone speaks, their name appears above their dialogue.

Like this:

**JACK**

I didn't do it.

**SARAH**

You were there.

**JACK**

That doesn't mean I did it.

Keep dialogue natural.

And here's a good rule:

## **PEOPLE RARELY SAY EXACTLY WHAT THEY MEAN.**

If two people are angry with each other, they don't necessarily say:

"I am angry because I feel betrayed by you."

They might say:

"You always do this."

And the other person says:

“Do what?”

And suddenly we have tension.

**Structure Without the Headache**

You've probably heard people talk about:

**Three-act structure.**

**Inciting incidents.**

**Midpoints.**

**Climaxes.**

**Character arcs.**

It can sound like you're trying to build a nuclear reactor.

You aren't.

For your first short, try thinking about your story in **five simple pieces**.

## **1. SOMETHING HAPPENS.**

Something disrupts your character's normal life.

A phone rings.

Someone arrives.

Someone disappears.

A secret is revealed.

A package shows up.

A body is discovered.

A dog gets loose.

Anything.

## **2. YOUR CHARACTER RESPONDS.**

They have to deal with what happened.

## **3. THINGS GET WORSE.**

This is important.

Don't let your character solve the problem immediately.

Make things harder.

If they're looking for someone, they find the wrong person.

If they're hiding something, someone gets suspicious.

If they're trying to escape, the door is locked.

#### **4. YOUR CHARACTER MAKES A CHOICE.**

This is often the heart of the movie.

They have to decide:

**What am I going to do?**

#### **5. THE CONSEQUENCE.**

We see what happened because of that choice.

And then:

**THE END.**

That's it.

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### **THINK ABOUT THE END FIRST**

Here's a surprisingly useful trick:

**Write the ending before you write the beginning.**

You don't necessarily have to put it on the page first.

But know what you're building toward.

For example:

At the end, the woman returns the money.

Now you can write toward that moment.

Maybe earlier she desperately needs money.

Maybe she almost keeps it.

Maybe she even spends some of it.

Then she realizes who the money belongs to.

Now the final decision means something.

The ending should feel like:

**“Of course.”**

Not:

**“Wait... what?”**

Unless you're intentionally trying to make the audience say:

**“Wait... WHAT?”**

That's allowed too.

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## THE FINAL IMAGE

One of the best things you can think about is:

**What is the final image of my movie?**

Maybe it's:

A father watching his daughter drive away.

A woman sitting alone at a birthday party.

A detective closing a case file.

A child finally opening the closet door.

A man putting his wedding ring into a drawer.

A couple laughing together after a terrible night.

That final image can become the emotional punctuation mark of your film.

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## KEEP IT FILMABLE

Here's something screenwriters sometimes forget:

**Someone eventually has to make this movie.**

If you're writing a short film that you hope to produce yourself, think about what you actually have access to.

One house?

Great.

One car?

Great.

Three actors?

Perfect.

A backyard?

Fantastic.

You don't need to write around what you *don't* have.

Write around what you **do** have.

A short film set entirely in one apartment can be fantastic.

A film with two actors can be fantastic.

A movie that takes place in one room can be fantastic.

## LIMITATIONS CAN HELP YOU.

If you only have two actors and one location, you suddenly have to become creative.

That's a good thing.

## **\*Finish the Damn Thing\***

This might be the most important advice in this entire guide:

**Finish your screenplay.**

Don't spend six months writing the first five pages.

Don't keep rewriting page three because you aren't sure whether the character should say "Hey" or "Hello."

Don't start another screenplay every time you get stuck.

Finish.

Even if it's bad.

Especially if it's bad.

Because you can learn from a finished bad screenplay.

You can't learn nearly as much from the perfect screenplay that exists only in your head.

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## **YOUR FIRST DRAFT IS ALLOWED TO SUCK**

Seriously.

That's what first drafts are for.

Your first draft is you figuring out:

**What the hell this movie is.**

Your second draft is where you start making it better.

So don't worry about perfection.

Get the story down.

Then go back.

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## **THE REWRITE**

When you've finished, put the script away for a few days.

Then read it again.

Ask yourself:

## **Is the beginning interesting?**

If the first page is boring, the audience may never get to page two.

## **Does the character want something?**

If not, give them something.

## **Does something happen?**

If not, make something happen.

## **Does the story get harder?**

If not, make it harder.

## **Does the character make a choice?**

If not, give them one.

## **Does the ending feel satisfying?**

If not, rethink it.

## **Can I cut anything?**

You probably can.

Short films are especially vulnerable to unnecessary scenes.

If a scene doesn't:

- advance the story,
- reveal something important,
- create conflict,
- make us laugh,
- scare us,
- surprise us,
- or deepen the character...

**Cut it.**

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## READ IT OUT LOUD

This is one of the best tricks a writer can use.

Read your screenplay out loud.

Actually say the dialogue.

You'll immediately discover things that look fine on the page but sound ridiculous when spoken.

You'll also hear:

- repetitive dialogue,
- unnatural sentences,
- boring scenes,
- characters who all sound the same,
- and places where the movie drags.

Your ears are often better editors than your eyes.

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## THEN GET SOMEONE ELSE TO READ IT

Give it to someone you trust.

Don't ask:

“Did you like it?”

That's not very useful.

Instead ask:

**“Where were you bored?”**

And:

**“What did you think was going to happen?”**

And:

**“What did you think the movie was about?”**

Those answers can be incredibly helpful.

Remember:

**You don't have to take every note.**

It's your movie.

But listen carefully.

Sometimes another person sees a problem you can't see because you've been staring at the script for three weeks.

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## FINALLY...

Don't wait until you feel like a "real screenwriter."

You become a screenwriter by **writing screenplays**.

Your first one probably won't be perfect.

Your second one might be better.

Your fifth might surprise you.

And eventually, you may look back at that first little 8-page screenplay and laugh.

That's okay.

That screenplay did something important.

**It got you started.**

So find an idea.

Give someone a problem.

Put something in their way.

Make them choose.

Write the ending.

And then...

**FADE OUT.**

