

Introduction to Scriptwriting

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Introduction:

Even if you've never considered writing a script, learning the basics can help you tighten your own writing and improve your dialogue and visualization skills. Scripts require writing that focuses on character and movement.

Getting Started:

Choose Your Theme/Story

- Does my idea work onstage?
 - Is it visual?
 - Is it character/dialog-driven?
 - Can you tell the story in about 20,000 - 25,000 words, give or take? [1 minute/page (Courier 12), 90 pages = 90 minutes]
 - Does it have doable set and cast requirements?
 - The fewer set changes, the better.
 - Female roles are easier to cast. Male-centric scripts are, of course, fine but might not sell as well as those with more female parts.
 - Be realistic in what works for the stage. It can be as simple as *Our Town* or more complicated, like Moliere. Still, it's not about the set, it's about the story.
- Can you tell the story in three acts?
 - Act One: Exposition—set up the characters, conflict and world of the play.
 - Act Two: Complication—where everything that can go wrong, does.
 - Act Three: Resolution—the main conflict comes to a conclusion.

Writing Dialog that Moves

Dialog is, of course, key to a great script. It either keeps the story moving or it doesn't. It needs to be:

- Realistic/Authentic—make sure it's appropriate for the character, not just in dialect/accents but in word choice.
- Interesting—you don't have time to be boring in a play, though a dull character, if done right, can add humor or make a main character seem cleverer by comparison.
- Tight—just as in novel dialog, you want to weed out the filler/weasel words.
- Fun—even if you're not writing a comedy, give your audience something lyrical.
- Diverse—mix up the conversations. Watch out for too many two-person interactions.

Blocking: Where is everyone?

When characters come onstage, what they do while they're there, and when they leave all works in fun ways to advance the story. Here are a few considerations:

- Who is needed in this scene and who isn't?
- Whose entrance would stir things up?
- What are your characters doing and why?
- When is the best—or worst—time for a character to leave?

The Beat Sheet from *Save the Cat!* by Blake Snyder

Opening Image—A visual that represents the struggle & tone of the story. A snapshot of the main character's problem, before the adventure begins.

Set-up—Expand on the “before” snapshot. Present the main character's world as it is, and what is missing in their life.

Theme Stated (happens during the set-up)—What your story is about; the message, the truth. Usually, it is spoken to the main character or in their presence, but they don't understand the truth...not until they have some personal experience and context to support it.

Catalyst—The moment where life as it is changes. The telegram, the act of catching your loved one cheating, allowing a monster onboard the ship, meeting the true love of your life, etc. The “before” world is no more, change is underway.

Debate—But change is scary and for a moment, or a brief number of moments, the main character doubts the journey they must take. “Can I face this challenge? Do I have what it takes? Should I go at all?” It is the last chance for the hero to chicken out.

Break Into Two (Act Two)—The main character makes a choice and the journey begins. We leave the “thesis” world and enter the upside-down, opposite world of act two.

B Story—This is when there's a discussion about the theme – the nugget of truth. Usually, this discussion is between the main character and the love interest. So, the B Story is usually called the “love story.”

The Promise of the Premise—This is when Indiana Jones tries to beat the Nazis to the Lost Ark, when the detective finds the most clues and dodges the most bullets. This is when the main character explores the new world and the audience is entertained by the premise they have been promised.

Midpoint—Dependent upon the story, this moment is when everything is great or everything is awful. The main character either gets everything they think they want (great) or doesn't get what they think they want at all (awful). But not everything we think we want is what we actually need in the end.

Bad Guys Close In—Doubt, jealousy, fear: foes both physical and emotional regroup to defeat the main character's goal, and the main character's great/awful situation disintegrates.

All Is Lost—The opposite moment from the midpoint: awful or great. The moment the main character realizes they've lost everything they gained, or everything they now have has no meaning. The initial goal now looks even more impossible than before. And here, something or someone dies. It can be physical or emotional, but the death of something old makes way for something new to be born.

Dark Night of the Soul—The main character hits bottom, and wallows in hopelessness. The *Why hast thou forsaken me, Lord?* moment. Mourning the loss of what has “died” – the dream, the goal, the mentor character, the love of your life, etc. But you must fall completely before you can pick yourself back up and try again.

Break Into Three (Act Three)—Thanks to a fresh idea, new inspiration, or last-minute thematic advice from the B Story (usually the love interest), the main character chooses to try again.

Finale—This time around, the main character incorporates the theme—the nugget of truth that now makes sense to them—into their fight for the goal because they have experience from the A Story and context from the B Story. Act three is about synthesis!

Final Image—opposite of opening image, proving, visually, that a change has occurred within the character.

Software & Formatting:

Final Draft

- Industry standard
- Automatically formats and paginates scripts
- Highly recommended by pros
- Makes things so much easier!

Celtx or Word

- Cheaper, especially if you already have Word
- Celtx also provides formatting assistance; Word does not
- Not as user-friendly as FD