

CHAPTER ONE
SCREENPLAY

THE GUERRILLA FILM
MAKERS POCKETBOOK



WRITING A FEATURE FILM BLAKE SNYDER

Q – When you have no money or experience to make a film, how can you use the screenplay to your advantage?

Blake – In any filmmaking endeavor no matter the budget, concept is king. Time and again it's been proven that no amount of money thrown against a project with a vague or uninspiring concept will succeed. If we look at *The Island* as an example, it had Michael Bay, Scarlett Johansson and Ewan McGregor. It had \$150 million in budget and another \$50 million in advertising. And it made just \$32 million domestically because the audience didn't know what it was. Answering the basic question, "What is it?", takes no money at all and doing so is the first step to success.

Q – What advice would you give on choosing a concept and moving forward with it?

Blake – I'm a great believer in pitching. Go to Starbucks, pitch to civilians and see if their eyes light up. If the person you're pitching starts pitching back with ideas to improve it, then you know you are on to something. Further, I think all ideas need to have irony in them. Those are the ones that stand out. And your idea needs to be primal. The ones that work on a caveman level work the best.

Q – How would you go about creating a good structure and plot?

WHAT MAKES A GREAT STORY?

It may seem counter-intuitive, but cameras and microphones are the least important things about filmmaking. What about actors, crew and money? All very important – especially the last one, but no, they do not make or break your film. Ironically, the most important thing is both the cheapest and most elusive item – your script. Without a great script, you have nothing.

A great story has fantastic characters through which the narrative is told. People watch movies for people – and that is why they are more important in the long run than the plot. Great characters mean your audience will have personas that reflect themselves and their passions, troubles, hopes and dreams. We want to identify with them and watch them overcome their problems. And we want great villains. They show the worst in all of us and are best when that 'worst' is something with which we sympathize.

A great story also has a plot that always feels fresh, new and surprising. The greatest sin you can commit as a storyteller is to bore the audience. You must grab the audience from the get go, and never let them go. You must keep the stakes rising, the jokes coming fast and furious and the drama always at a fever pitch. If you can do this, the rest will sort itself out. Good luck!

Blake – In my book *Save the Cat*, I have the Blake Snyder Beat Sheet, which contains the 15 beats that are in every story. It's a process of transformation – the hero starts out one way and ends another. If you put your hero through the obstacle course of those 15 beats, he will transform. A new device that I have created to help fulfill the transformation is called the Five Point Finale. This covers the five main points of Act 3 that all heroes go through in order to achieve a resolution. One thing to keep in mind is that these things work because they hit us on a gut level, so if you are shying away from structure because it's formulaic or hampers your creativity, you are misleading yourself.

Q – What do you suggest as ways to help write great characters?

Blake – The most important thing about any character is that they are pushed all the way back. When we first meet them their world has to be pocked with problems, which are usually 1000 different things masquerading as fear. The

WRITING DIALOGUE

1. *It's easy to overwrite dialogue. Beware.*
2. *Speech comes in short sentences with simple words. Eavesdrop on a conversation in a café for research.*
3. *We often speak in metaphor and euphemism. Let the reader get the subtext of your point.*
4. *On the nose dialogue feels stilted. Avoid it.*
5. *Don't overuse punctuation marks.*
6. *Read your dialogue aloud or have a friend read it for you. You will see what sounds bad or is running long.*
7. *Don't be afraid of minimal dialogue or even no dialogue. A lot can be said in silence.*
8. *Rewrite!*

story will be about how they get rid of those fears and problems. This will lead to conflict, which will lead to drama, which will get our attention. I think a trap that most filmmakers fall into is that they say, "Transforming isn't the way I envisioned it." But that is exactly what the audience *wants* to see.

Q – What is theme to you and what are some helpful ways of finding it?

Blake – Theme is the lesson learned by the hero. In my beat sheet I have a theme statement, which is a moment on page 5 where someone turns to the lead character and says something like, "He who has the gold makes the rules." At that moment the hero doesn't understand what that means – that is the theme. In the Pixar film *Cars*, on page 5 someone turns to Lightning McQueen and says "Racing ain't a one man deal, Lightning." That's the theme there. He's selfish to begin the story and he's selfless by the end. That is the lesson he learned. Many times you want to anchor theme to plot where in the course of the story there will be a debate whether the theme is true or not. All good movies are an up and down ripple of looking at every side of the theme. Theme is tied to and explored in the B story, which is usually the characters the hero meets in Act 2 in his new world. It can be the love story or the mentor relationship. These are the people who are teaching the spiritual lessons to the lead character.

Q – What are your opinions on finding your voice and writing good dialogue?

Blake – Finding your voice is a key element of a screenwriter or filmmaker's career. To me it is what do you do better than anyone else. What can hurt a screenplay is on the nose dialogue or a scene or

story premise that seems cliché. Just like your idea has to have irony, your characters need to be ironic and when they speak they must do so with irony. We want to be surprised by everything that happens.

Q – Are there any creative traps that writers can fall into and how do you get out of them?

Blake – Not knowing who your audience is. If your story is only interesting to you and a handful of people then you have a problem. The best way to avoid this, and most screenwriting issues for that matter, is go through all the steps I outline in *Save the Cat*. Get the idea, create a logline, pitch it, test it, break it out into the 15 beats, make sure the hero transforms, make sure the idea is big and grand enough, are there enough problems, make sure there is a spiritual reason for taking this journey, make sure there is a moral – if you can deliver those things, that's what makes a difference.

Q – Are there any mistakes that you see which drive you crazy?

Blake – I have a rule in my classes – no voiceover, no flashbacks, no dream sequences. I think those are crutches for a lot of beginners. Not that they don't belong in scripts, but if you can do without them it is a better exercise of your skills. Also not listening to criticism drives me crazy. Whether it's a friend, a civilian or someone in your writing group giving you a critique you need to listen to them. Feedback is a big part of filmmaking and if someone early on can give you a clue that something is amiss, you should pay attention. Now it's possible the feedback is wrong, but you should listen to it. And many times it's the message beneath what they are saying that is the true issue.

Q – Do you have any advice for new screenwriter/filmmakers?

Blake – This is the Golden Age for low budget filmmaking. You can start with a Youtube short and become a star and thereby break into the Hollywood system. You can make a short film, get into Sundance and then have a career making movies. There has never been a more democratic time. Even if you want to keep your movies small and idiosyncratic, you can market them that way and make a living doing it. Everyone is always looking for talent.

NOTE - Just weeks after we interviewed Blake, sadly he passed away.




WRITING FOR LOW BUDGETS GENEVIEVE JOLLIFFE

Q – What makes a script suitable for low budget production?

Gen – I have written and collaborated on screenplays made for as little as ten grand, all the way up to a multi million dollar project that we sold to Warner Bros. Of course both are about a great story well told, but with the low budget feature, there is a huge amount of practical stuff that can just make your life easier. Right now though it's never been easier and cheaper to write and make a film.

Q – What kind of practical stuff makes you life easier?

Gen – When I made my first film, an actioner called *The Runner*, I learned heaps about script and logistics. Stuff like, keep your crew in one place. This means tailoring a story that can be told in one or two locations. A great example of this would be the movie *Bound*. I also learned that writing 'night time' or 'it's raining' in the script was great to visualise at the word processor, but a nightmare during production. So keep your locations minimal, and reduce any night time or atmospherics.

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Keeping your characters to a minimum helps too, as there are less actors to deal with, and that means less makeup, costume, catering, cabs etc. This also forces you to be a better writer as you can't rely on script contrivances so readily. It really all does need to come from deep down inside the characters. And actors love that, so it's a win/win strategy. Cheaper production, better writing, better performances.

Q – How long should a low budget screenplay run?

Gen – Don't you mean how short? Really, it needs to be as short as you can make it. 80 to 90 pages is a good rule. If you have a 125 page script, it's either hugely overwritten or too big for your budget. So you need to cut.

Q – How do you cut a script without damaging it?

Gen – Ironically, most stories work better when trimmed down. It's like a distillation process. I rewrite every sentence and see if you can get the same message and information over, but in fewer words. Usually, I can.

You can also merge characters too, as often in the subplots, characters can perform multiple story functions. Three sisters become two for instance. It sounds weird when you have spent months on a script, but it's better you try it now than the producer and director getting a hacksaw out over lunch when they realise they just can't shoot it. I have heard of people being advised to just reformat their script to make it shorter, which I think is stupid. Stick to the standard format then you know where you stand.

WRITING LOW BUDGET

1. *There's an inevitability that your script will be a little dialogue heavy. Make it fascinating.*

2. *Keep your characters to a minimum. See if you can cut or merge multiple characters into one.*

3. *Keep your locations to a minimum and preferably in places you can get for free.*

4. *Write something that can be shot during the day and outside. Less need for lighting setups. In the woods for instance.*

5. *Set the story in the present so there is no need for period or futuristic costumes and props.*

6. *Keep your script to 80-90 pages. It's less to film.*

CONT...

7. Avoid visual effects, even if you are a whizz on After Effects. It all adds time and no-one is impressed by VFX, only great stories.

8. Avoid explosions, car crashes, etc. unless you are prepared to 'cut away' instead of showing the action (which can work very well).

9. Avoid snow, rain, mist and even exterior night if possible.

10. Avoid using animals or children. If you have to use kids, get older ones to play younger.

11. Audiences will watch anything, no matter how cheap, as long as the story keeps them engaged.

12. All these limitations **MUST** become your allies and inspiration.

Q – What concepts work best for low budget films?

Gen – More often than not it's a character study – so choose a really fascinating character. We made a serial killer thriller and the writing was so much easier because hey, he's a serial killer – whatever he says, it's gonna be interesting! We also pulled huge amounts from research and put it into the mouths of the characters and into the plot. Choosing really fascinating characters makes your life so much easier. So the story can be about interesting people stuck or locked into a single or limited locations.

Of course you can drift away from this model, but every new location, prop, situation, character etc., stretches your budget even further. Locations like 'the woods' or 'your uncles' country house' are great as you don't need to do any dressing. And when it really comes to it, almost any story can be told in the woods. Try it with your idea now. Can it be told in the woods? That kind of lateral thinking will also help make your story a little more unique too.

Q – What if you have a big event like a car crash?

Gen – We made a film called *Urban Ghost Story* and it had a spectacular car crash in it, but the whole film revolved on what happened in those few seconds. It was pivotal to both the setup and resolution, and so we did it properly with a professional stunt team. It was surprisingly cost effective for what we actually got on film. But in many other circumstances, I would say, can you play the scene as a memory? We the audience hear the sound while the survivor of the crash

Slug line, all upper case, abbreviated into INT (for interior), EXT (for exterior), followed by the scene location, followed by DAY or NIGHT. Slug line followed by a line break.

Script title (optional).

Script edge, 1" from the top of the page.

Descriptive Action text

Character name, upper case, indented by 3½"

Space between last scene and next slugline is 1.5 line breaks (approx ½")

Left edge indented 1½" for binding. Right hand side indented by 1"

Parenthetical comment in brackets, indented 3"

All text is 12 point courier

Character dialogue word wrapped at approximately 4-4½"

Rocketman and Vampire Girl

INT. CHURCH - DAY

Sombre women sit in church. Grandad is there, looking around for someone. A female Vicar stands in the pulpit.

VICAR

It's been ten years since the Lord took our men - husbands, brothers, sons...

EXT. MEMORIAL - DAY

Twenty two white crosses, impeccably groomed. In the centre is a large Monumental Cross - wild flowers are placed at it's base. Connor is crouched in front of one of the crosses - resolute.

EXT. DUNVEGAN VILLAGE - DAY

Connor rides in on his dirtbike, a large satellite dish still partly wrapped is strapped to the back. The village is wind swept and run down. People mill around, doing their morning chores. Everyone - postman, shopkeeper, passers-by, window cleaner, milkman - is female and middle aged.

Connor parks up by the corner shop. Davey and Siobhan sit on the pavement furiously sucking lollipops.

CONNOR

(accusing)
What are you two doing?

Davey Points off toward Joseph's large black car parked across the street.

DAVEY

The writer's come back, and he's brought the Vampire girl with him.

Connor looks at the car. The front passenger door window is a quarter open. He looks around. No sign of Joseph.

CONNOR

Vampires don't exist - anyway it's daytime, they can't come out in the daylight.

DAVEY

He's blocked the windows of his hearse so that the vampire girl can go out in the day.

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Page numbers on bottom right

remembers, and maybe weeps? You get the emotional impact of the crash for the cost of one close up and a car crash sound effect. And again, this limitation gets the actors all excited too, and so you end up with something that connects with audiences more authentically and deeply.

Q – Any other script or story tips?

Gen – Sure. Things like, ‘four policemen burst in’ should be changed to, ‘two policemen burst in’, to ‘two plain clothed policemen burst in’, to ‘the characters hear the sound of the police bursting in’.

We also learned in our serial killer thriller that you can have characters tell stories of big events in their lives, and you kind of get the production value of that event as the audience imagines it as they talk. Kind of like that scene in *Jaws* where Quint talks about his boat going down during WW2 and the men getting eaten one by one by the sharks. Great scene!

Audiences love mystery too – you don’t need to show them everything. What was really in the bag in *Pulp Fiction*? Use that to your advantage. I know cinema is all about ‘show don’t tell...’ but occasionally you can ‘tell compellingly and don’t show...’

Buy into the fact that you are making an exploitation film, in the true sense of the phrase – you are exploiting the resources you have around you. So do you know

WHAT IS A GENRE SCRIPT?

‘Genre’ refers to a group of films that are similar in tone, setting, topic and / or format. Examples would be ‘comedy’, ‘horror’, ‘thriller’ or ‘action’. Genre films have conventions and audience expectations, like the body count getting higher and higher as a horror film moves along.

Watch some of your favorite films, of any genre, and you will start to get a feel for the patterns, rules and expectations of the genre. With this blueprint in mind, you can start structuring your own genre film – just remember the genre conventions may be recognizable, but your story, characters, location and events should be as original as possible.

anyone with a boat? Can you have it for a month?
OK now your film is set on a boat...

Q – What common mistakes do you see?

Gen – Perhaps the easiest one to correct is just over writing. Simply, there are too many words used.

And then, not getting into the story late enough. If your script is 120 pages long, from my experience, I would suggest that you could cut 20 pages from the first 40 pages. Often we don't need all that setup, back story and explanation. You may need it as a writer, but we the audience 'get it' fast, and we just don't need it all explained to us. Usually complex back stories can be distilled down to a single word and a look. I know it's a cliché, but its as much about the gaps and silences as it is the words.

All of this is a product of not rewriting enough and believing that draft 1 or 2 is just peachy and ready to shoot.

Q – What advice would you offer a film maker embarking on their first feature with no budget?

Gen – It's always about the story. Always bring it back to that foundation. Fascinating characters doing compelling stuff, with a little mystery thrown in to keep people guessing about what will happen. If you get that part right, you could shoot it on a cell phone and you will still win awards, get an agent and get work. Just make a commitment to never be dull.

SHORT OR FEATURE?

1. A feature film is a saleable product, which could generate some cash.
2. Writing a feature is much, much more work than a short. If anyone tells you writing a short is harder, they are talking nonsense!
3. Shorts often don't expand very well into features, though it can be done.
4. Shorts lead to meetings about 'what's next?' Features CAN lead to jobs.
5. Shorts are excellent for learning the technical crafts of filmmaking – editing, sound, directing actors, etc.
6. A great short can get you Oscar nominated.
7. Shorts and features are different. Don't fall into the trap of thinking a feature is the same as a short, just longer.



SCRIPT DOCTOR JULIE GRAY

Q – What are things to think about when choosing a story?

Julie – It's crucial to have an original and entertaining idea. I think a lot of new writers struggle with that. Writers should get a logline down on paper and be critical; what other movies are similar to this idea? When did they come out? Do I really have a unique twist on this idea? Really test that idea out before writing the script. You'll save yourself so much heartbreak later.

Q – What are some tips that you would give for creating a solid structure and plot?

Julie – It starts with great characters because structure is closely woven to character development. A character is going to experience an arc of change and if you lay that transformation side by side with your structure, you will see a close connection with that hero's journey. For example, the *call to adventure*, which is your inciting incident, will happen around page 10. Your first act break, which is when your character enters this new world from which they cannot return until they complete their arc, occurs around page 30 – so the connectivity of character arc, plot and structure is pretty closely tied. Ask yourself – are things getting

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worse and worse? Is each scene really forcing the next scene to occur like dominoes?

I tell writers to remember that when we go to the movies, we want to see a story with a beginning, a middle and an end in such a way that we get resolution or satisfaction. So when thinking about your plot, you want to think about whether you're really delivering on that promise of change, redemption and closure. Things start out one way, then they get worse and worse until your hero finds a way to overcome, and become a new person in doing so. Real life is nothing like that. That's why we go to the movies.

Q – What are some tips on writing good action lines?

Julie – Be as pithy as possible. Writing a screenplay is a bit like haiku – truncated but highly evocative. Make sure your “voice” comes through in the writing. That means a reader can really get a sense of your personality when reading your script. You want to avoid writing more than four action lines in a row or there will be too much black on the page and that's harder for people to read. You don't want to write action that is blow-by-blow and too detailed. Use shorthand. That's what screenwriting really is. Shorthand with personality. If you are writing a particular genre, your action lines take on that genre. So thriller and horror action lines should read scary and exciting, comedy action lines should read funny, etc. Never write dry action lines.

Q – What are some great tips for writing dialogue?

SCRIPT EDITING

1. *The art of screenwriting is 'saying the most with the least'.*
2. *Your script will be improved by a judicious edit. Trust us on this.*
3. *Try rewriting every sentence but with fewer words.*
4. *It isn't about great prose, but it should jump off the page. Fewer words often say more.*
5. *Try cutting out entire sentences. Does it still work? Is it better?*
6. *Take feedback and act on it – you will know in your gut if it's right.*
7. *Get some actors or friends to read the script aloud. It's a wake up call for sure!*
8. *Get to the action as quick as possible.*
9. *Remember. Less is more. Always.*

WRITING NARRATION

(the bits between the dialogue)

1. Film is a visual medium so write **ONLY** what can be seen. Beware of phrases like 'he feels sad...'
2. Keep narration to three lines or less. If you go over, start a new paragraph. This makes for a faster read.
3. Don't overwrite. Keep it short and snappy.
4. Spice things up. Use onomatopoeia - i.e. 'ROOOAR' instead of 'a lion roars'.
5. Short sentences. Create tension.
6. Italicizing, underlining or **bolding** make things stand out. But don't overdo it.
7. Let your audience know where your characters are geographically to avoid confusion.

Julie – Dialogue should sound natural. One of the best exercises to sharpen those skills is to eavesdrop on conversations and listen to how people talk. People rarely say exactly what they mean. People use sarcasm. People joke. People can be overdramatic. So listen to the beats and the pauses and the subtext. If there is one thing that will kill your script and drive readers crazy, it is stilted, on the nose dialogue that is overly expository and doesn't reveal anything more about the character. You can have fun here. You can write characters with specificity as to how they talk. Dialogue tells us where your character is from and who he or she is – do they have habits? Are they from the South or another country? Are they pedantic? Are they an intellectual person?

Q – Would you advocate a table read to look for problems?

Julie – Yes. They are a great way to hear your script's flaws. Most writers get too close to their work. They think it is all there on the page. But having actors read your script is a different story. The things that are not working will stand out in living color and the things that are working will be so seamless.

Q – What do you see most often that drives you crazy in a new writer's script?

Julie – The thing that annoys me is the BOSH script. That's "Bunch Of Stuff Happens." These tend to be stories that have a soft premise which is entertainment-speak for a plot without tension, conflict or originality.

Q – What does a script consultant do and when should they be engaged?

Julie – A script consultant gives you notes and feedback on your script that goes beyond script coverage at a production company. That coverage is designed to weed out the good from the bad. A script consultant tells the writer what's working, what's not working and gives suggestions on how to fix it. My advice is to first get some feedback from some trusted friends and colleagues who are at least somewhat familiar with the world of film. Just to get a gut reaction. Next, if you have any friends who are in the industry and have some credibility, I would get their feedback. Then ultimately it is best to go to a consultant because they are not your friends. They are not going to bullshit you. They will tell you how your script stands up against others they have read in the genre including those that got made. They will tell you if it is commercial. If you wrote something identical to *Memento*, they are going to tell you it's just like *Memento* and therefore not going to do well in the marketplace. The range of cost is great. It can be as little as \$85 to \$300 to thousands of dollars. So you have to research and choose the analyst or the company that fits your vibe and budget.

Q - Is networking important for writers, and film makers?

Networking is crucial. Film is a very social business. You need to be meeting industry professionals who may be in a position to help you out down the line and you also need to be meeting your peers and fellow writers. Meeting other writers can be a great way to grow your network; you can get notes, feedback, advice and support through other writers. Meeting industry professionals can pave the way for

8. Use metaphors to get your ideas across.

9. Avoid repeating phrases or words. Buy a thesaurus!

10. Read your narration out loud and you will see when things are running long.

11. Look at your pages. If it looks dense, get aggressive and start rewriting or cutting.

12. Read professional screenplays to get a feel for how your script should read and look.

Do NOT underestimate how long it takes, and how hard it can be, to write a great script... And your movie can only be as good as the screenplay...

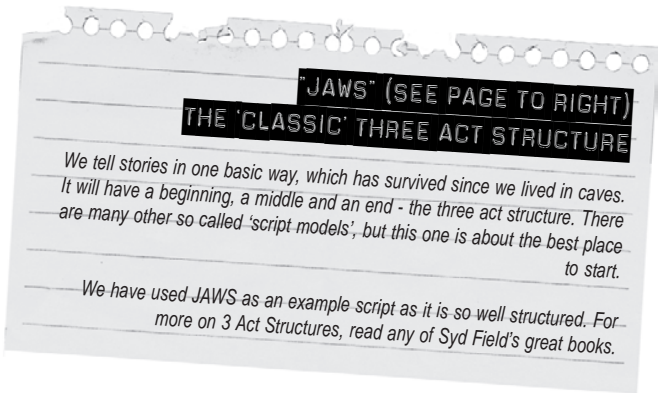


REWRITE, REWRITE,
REWRITE...
...re-imagine, rephrase,
refine, reduce...
REWRITE, REWRITE,
REWRITE...

meetings, referrals or even landing representation. If you're not a member of a writer's group, consider forming or joining one. Online forums can be rich with information but beware those anonymous individuals who may be misleading at best and scathing at worst. In person networking is much more powerful, over all.

Q – What advice would you give a new filmmaker?

Julie – Watch a lot of movies that you love and want to emulate. This will help you learn about the craft. And never take the screenwriting aspect too lightly because if it's not on the page, it won't be on the screen.



**"JAWS" (SEE PAGE TO RIGHT)
THE 'CLASSIC' THREE ACT STRUCTURE**

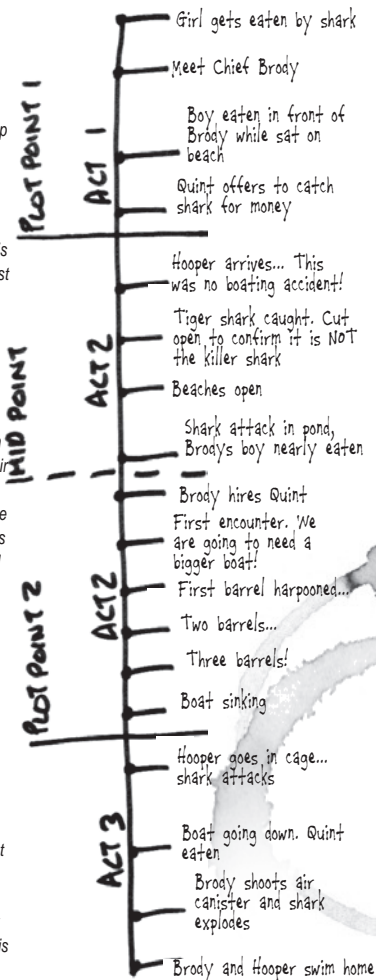
We tell stories in one basic way, which has survived since we lived in caves. It will have a beginning, a middle and an end - the three act structure. There are many other so called 'script models', but this one is about the best place to start.

We have used JAWS as an example script as it is so well structured. For more on 3 Act Structures, read any of Syd Field's great books.

Act 1 (the beginning): lasts about $\frac{1}{4}$ of the running time of the film. Here we meet the characters including the villain, get to know the world and set the tone of the film (comedy, horror, etc.). You can have a prologue to help set up back-story before getting into the main portion of the film. Halfway through there will be an inciting incident that gets the story moving. You end with the Act 1 break, which is an event that launches us into the rest of the story.

Act 2 (the middle): lasts about $\frac{1}{2}$ of the running time of the film. This is where your characters try to achieve the goal that has been set-up at the Act 1 break. Obstacles will be thrown in their path by external forces or their own internal misgivings, which they must overcome. At the midpoint of the film, there is a reversal of action. This means the heroes will have achieved some goal but in doing so it leads to bigger problems. $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through Act 2, there is generally a power shift where the hero begins to weaken and the villain gains power. This ends at the Act 2 break where the hero is at their weakest and the villain is at their strongest.

Act 3 (the end): lasts about $\frac{1}{4}$ of the running time of the film. Everything comes to a head here. The hero must pick themselves up after the end of Act 2 and take on the villain for the climax of the story. They may or may not succeed, but the important thing is that they grow from the experience.





WRITING A SHORT FILM CHRIS JONES


Q – You have written and made both shorts and features, why go back to shorts?

Chris – Writing *Gone Fishing* was a tactical move, to make a high quality film and try to win an Oscar™.


Q – How did you approach the script?

Chris – Like every script I have ever written. I avoided it for a great deal of time, terrified of failure. But at the same time, kind of stewing in the ideas. The first draft came out very quickly. I did three further drafts thereafter, working with several other writers who I gave carte blanche to edit and write whatever they liked. Of course, I could re-edit what they added later, but both Guy Rowlands and Martin Gooch both added amazing material to the script. I just kept it all shepherded so it stayed within my vision. Each draft was about a day's work, with a week or two of stewing between. Feedback from friends was vital too.

Q – Have you read lots of other short scripts?

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EXTERNAL VERSUS INTERNAL

The best stories are dramatic. And the best way to achieve drama is to create obstacles, problems and dilemmas, which your characters much overcome. There are two basic places where these can come from – the external world of a character and the internal personality flaws of a character.

External obstacles come from the villain. Either they are directly set up by them (such as destroying your best weapon) or come about from one of their actions (having to cross a minefield because the villain destroyed the easier path across a bridge).

Internal obstacles come from a character's personal demons such as a fear of flying, impulsiveness or low self esteem from an overbearing parent. A character must attempt to overcome these issues throughout the story in order to grow as a character.

Overcoming external problems can instill confidence in a character to face their internal issues. Likewise, coming to terms with an internal flaw can give someone the empowerment to take on external obstacles.

Chris – Yes. Most of what I read is overwritten. To say they are also cliché is also true but a little unfair as cliché's would get written out in later drafts. So I guess what I see is generally overwritten and underdeveloped. If only the writers would commit to a couple of redrafts! I also see that there are two broad camps of short film. One is about entertainment and a broad message, the other is about observation and interpretation and is a rarefied experience. Of course there is huge variance between these two models. I would put *Gone Fishing* very much in the entertainment camp.

Q – *Did you read many books on short screenplays?*

Chris – I had a look at some but I did not find much useful in them. A micro budget short film should really be conceived, shot, edited and up on youtube in a few weeks. Too many short film makers think of their short film as a ticket to the big time. It can be of course, and that's what I tried to do, but I was doing that

DOCUMENTARY STORY BASICS

1. Always start with a “burning question,” such as why is something happening or how come no-one is doing anything about an issue. It has to bother you. Greatly!

2. Docs always have a niche audience, but the best stories find a way to make that niche problem universal.

3. Docs are only as good as the questions asked in interviews. Research thoroughly so you know what to ask and don't shy away from tough questions.

4. Non-fiction storytelling doesn't mean you can abandon the three-act structure and character development.

5. Use experts to back up your facts or to give context to your plot. It gives the film gravitas and believability.

with three feature films behind me – and it took a year of hard work too. You can't 'get it' from a book or a course, you really only learn the craft of screenwriting by hammering the keyboard, getting it to set, getting it in post and finally putting it in front of an audience. Do that, then read books and do courses. Then make another film, and so on.

Q – What is the difference between writing a short and feature?

Chris – The big one is the scale of the project. Not the story you tell, but the fact that it's 15 pages and not 120. You can read it over coffee, and remember the whole thing! With a feature script, so much time is spent dealing with domino effect changes to the script. Of course that happens in shorts, but it's not the same, mainly because you don't have so many subplots and characters. I have to say, after working in features, it was a joy to write a short. There is a myth that writing a great short is harder than writing a great feature. Utter nonsense, propagated by people who have never written features no doubt!

Q – Is there a story format for shorts?

Chris – I suppose so. By their very nature, shorts tend to be a little avante garde and experimental. And so they should be. It's too big a risk to make those 'out there' creative choices on a feature, but a short is much more disposable if things go wrong. So short film makers can and do take more creative risks.

I have seen a number of basic story formats. Many follow a character through a moment in their lives, where a choice needs to be made, kind of a minimalist plot that is big on character. Others

follow a more traditional three act structure and tell well conceived and executed narratives. The twist in the tail is always an audience pleaser, but it must be done well.

For me I have read too many scripts set in inner city environments with 'young people issue-tastic' narratives. I guess it's a symptom of the emerging film maker group and the fact that many may be in film schools in cities. Nothing wrong with it, but I would always choose to be different.

Q – Are there clear genres too?

Chris – Yes. For instance, there is a thriving and very 'out there' horror short film scene, complete with ghettoised film festivals and fan bases. All the same questions asked of features get asked of shorts though, especially when programming at a festival. What kind of movie is it? What's it called? Do you have a poster? Who is in it?

When you roll the whole thing into one package – complete creative control, fast turnaround, the ability to tell stories that would never get made as a feature, film festivals waiting with open arms, and ultra cost effectiveness - shorts do look very attractive.

Q – So what makes a great short script?

Chris – Conflict and controversy always play well in short films. As a writer, you have no commissioning editor or sales agent breathing down your neck so that can be liberating. You really do have creative control, and so you can go to greater extremes. The shorts I have seen that have worked very well often take a contemporary issue and then push it to the logical ends.

6. Try to get both sides of the story. It will make your doc seem less biased.

7. You need obstacles and villains to create drama – otherwise you are making a promotional piece. They can be people, things or institutions. For the latter, try to get a person to represent it.

8. If the doc is following you, then you must grow as a person.

9. When choosing someone's story to follow, make sure they are open, honest and will tell you all.

10. Documentary filmmaking is fiction filmmaking backwards. You make pictures and then create the story in the edit room as opposed to following a script and making the pictures afterwards. Hire a great editor!

Personally, I don't like those films, but I do see that it is great story telling and that it can open doors and launch careers.

I think minimalism is also a trait of shorts – it is of features too, 'write the most with the least', but I think shorts in particular, work well when told in a very minimalist way. Audiences are really paying attention when they watch a short simply because it's such an unusual story format for most people. And so you can take greater story risks and allow people to find the narrative, rather than laying it out in front of them, which sometimes happens on features.

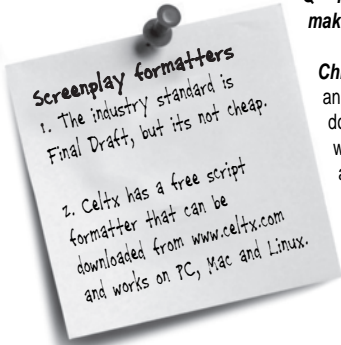
Q- What advice would you offer someone writing a short script?

Chris – Choose a great subject, something about which you are passionate. Write from the heart, then re-edit and re-draft. Keep refining the script, it's almost impossible to do too much of it, and it always comes back to haunt you in the edit if you don't. I would also get to some festivals and watch loads of shorts in a theatre, ideally not online as it's not the same. Most of all though, get out there and do it, and commit to the next film being just 'the next film' and not the 'highlight of your career'. Do it and move onto the next.

Finally, I would suggest you try and get involved in editing a film. You will be amazed at how much you can take out, and when you see other short films, you will also be amazed at how much the film makers often chose to leave in. You will then learn to take it out at the script stage and save resources.

Q – You have an online course about making shorts?

Chris – Yes, when we made *Gone Fishing* and got so close to the Oscars, we documented it all and filmed a two day workshop about the journey we undertook and what we learned. It has proven very useful for film makers and I am delighted that we have helped them make better choices and better use of limited resources. You can check it out at www.gonefishingseminar.com



Screenplay formatters

1. The industry standard is Final Draft, but it's not cheap.
2. Celtx has a free script formatter that can be downloaded from www.celtx.com and works on PC, Mac and Linux.