Storytelling: Narrative structures

Screenwriting

Screenwriting

What precedes screenwriting

Development of the film or TV show does not start with writing the screenplay. At the early stage, an author writes a short summary (several paragraphs) followed by a synopsis, which is a bit extended summary describing the core of the story, main plot points, and main characters.

The last stage before screenwriting is elaboration of a **treatment** and step outline. Treatments *"are often written in present tense, in a narrative-like prose, and highlight the most important information about your film, including title, logline, story summary, and character descriptions. Treatments are a way for a writer to test out an idea before investing their creative energy fully into a new screenplay. Treatments also allow for writers to summarise their story idea so they can present the story to studio executives or producers who might want to finance the film."*[1]

Step outline looks more like a technical document, especially when it's created in the form of a table. It divides the story into scenes which are described in details and can be numbered. Dialogues and interactions between characters are also often included or suggested. In the case of a documentary film, step outline can replace a screenplay.

Log line

Log line, or logline, is a very short summary (usually just one sentence) of a media piece – typically film, TV show, or radio programme – that raises an interest of the audience and describes the central conflict of the story. It is also written for potential producers before the film or TV show is produced (along with the synopsis or treatment at the latest).

Log lines have clearly given structure:

Inciting incident – beginning of the storyline

Protagonist – in rather abstract terms, main character is not mentioned

Action – what the protagonist does, what it the most important event

Antagonist – whom or what the protagonist faces

Even though these rules are important, sometimes breaking them helps to create a better log line: *"Blacksmith Will Turner teams up with eccentric pirate "Captain" Jack Sparrow to save his love, the governor's daughter, from Jack's former pirate allies, who are now undead."*[2]

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[1] MasterClass staff (November 8, 2020), How to Write a Film Treatment in 6 Steps, MasterClass, Retrieved from: https://www.masterclass.com/articles/how-to-write-a-film-treatment-in-6-steps

[2] Unitas, A. (March 8, 2020), How to Write a Logline Producers Won't Pass On [with Logline Examples], StudioBinder Inc., Retrieved from: https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/write-compelling-logline-examples/

Screenplay

Screenplay or script is a written work that represents a story to be later turned into a film, television programme, or a game. Nowadays, scripts are also used to plan interactive exhibitions in museums or events where engagement of an audience is an important element. It can be an original work or adaptation from existing works, for example books. They are written in several drafts – each is elaborating the previous one. Screenplays used in the TV are called teleplays and may have a bit simpler structure.

Spec script (or speculative script) is unsolicited and meant to be sold on the open market. It's used by beginners in the field who want to prove their talent or by any other screenwriters who just try to sell their work to producers.

Commissioned script – written by authors who were hired by producers.

Shooting script is used during the production. Scenes and even the shots are assigned numbers. New elements can be added and that's why the shooting script may have more pages than the original work. New pages are issued and numbered for example 10A, 10B and so on. If the text on a certain page is completely deleted, it contains the word "OMITTED". All these revised pages are distributed on coloured pages – one colour represents one round of revisions.

Format of a screenplay

There is no standard format of the screenplay and requirements of studios, TV stations, or producers may slightly differ. However, there are two general typographical formats of so called studio scripts which stipulate *"how elements of the screenplay such as scene headings, action, transitions, dialogue, character names, shots and parenthetical matter should be presented on the page, as well as font size and line spacing"*[3]:

A) Two columns – descriptions of the scenes are on the left, dialogues are on the right,

B) Continuous text – descriptions of the scenes and dialogues are arranged one after another, but are aligned differently. In this format, text is always written in 12 point and 10 pitch Courier. One page usually equals to one minutes of the final film, but it also depends on the content – pages with dialogues only may result in less time on the screen, pages with descriptions of scenes may result in longer scenes.

American Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences introduced *"Fifteen foibles that might invoke a poor first impression (based only on a script's title page and page one)"*[4]. They are available along with the sample of the script on this webpage: https://www.oscars.org/nicholl/screenwriting-resources.

In order to make the formatting easier, screenwriters can use any of the screenwriting software, such as Final Draft or Fade In (the first one was SmartKey).

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[3] Wikipedia (April 6, 2021), Screenplay, Retrieved from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Screenplay

[4] oscars.org, Academy Nicholl Fellowships (2021), Screenwriting resources: Formatting tips, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Retrieved from: https://www.oscars.org/nicholl/screenwriting-resources

Terms and abbreviations used in screenplays

Each scene has a **slug line,** which is basically a heading. It contains the following information: whether the scene is inside (INT.) or outside (EXT.), location, and time of the day.

Example:

INT. APARTMENT – DAY

When the scene is interrupted, it can be again introduced in this way:

INT. APARTMENT – CONTINUOUS

When the whole film beggins, it's indicated by

FADE IN:

It can be also used to indicate the beginning and ending of a scene or sequence.

When the whole film ends, it's indicated by END. But when the scene ends with fading into the black, it's indicated by FADE OUT or FADE TO.

Characters' names are written in all caps, e.g. JOHN. They can speak in front of a camera, but their voices can also be heard when they are out of a camera range. In that case, they speak Off-screen which is indicated as follows:

<div align="center">MARY (O.S.)</div>

When a narrator is meant to be heard, abbreviation for Voice Over is used:

<div align="center">MARY (V.O.)</div>

When the scene ends, *transition or cut* can be indicated by one of the following:

<div align="right">
CUT TO:

TIME CUT:

JUMP CUT:

QUICK CUT:

SMASH CUT:

MATCH CUT:

DISSOLVE TO:

FADE TO:

WIPE TO:
</div>

"Cut to" indicated a simple cut from one shot to another. "Time cut" indicates passage of time. In the case of a "Jump cut", one continuous scene (but also shot) is divided into three parts, with the middle one being removed to create the effect of jumping forward in time. It also happens that jump cuts are created unintentionally. "Quick cut" indicates that the shots are very short (in the technique called Fast cutting, about which you can learn in the course "Language of media").

"Smash cut" is used at a crucial moment in a scene where it is not expected. The next scene often has a very different nature, for example when the character wakes up from a nightmare and everything is alright.

In "Match cut", two shots on either side of the cut are connected by a subject, action, or subject matter (for example bone in the first shot and a spaceship in the second in Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey).

"Dissolve to" indicates that a longer period of time has passed between two scenes. In contrast to "Time cut", which doesn't require any special post-production work, it's shown as a gradual transition from one picture to another. "Fade to" means that one shot is fading into the black (fades out) and the following shot starts with black frames and gradually becomes brighter (fades in).

"Wipe to" is a film transition, where one shot replaces another by moving from one point of the shot to another, often with a special shape. Examples of the wipe are: star wipe, clock wipe (indicates that a time has passed), or wipe from left to right. They are used very often in Star Wars films.

When it is needed to cut back and forth between scenes, which are happening at the same time (e.g. when two characters are on the phone), it's not necessary to repeat the scene heading, but the INTERCUT can be used instead:

INT. FIRST APARTMENT – NIGHT

Scene description/dialogue.

INT. SECOND APARTMENT – NIGHT

Scene description/dialogue.

INTERCUT BETWEEN FIRST AND SECOND APARTMENT
Descriptions of both scenes/dialogue.

A *shot* indicates that the focal point is changed within one scene. Hence it indicates cuts within one scene. A few examples are:

ANGLE ON = shot takes place in the same location as the previous one, but shows some details (e.g. landscape and one part of it).

CLOSE ON = similar to the previous one, but showing a close up of a subject (e.g. one flower).

PAN TO = camera moves horizontally across the scene.

TILT TO = camera moves vertically.

POV = point of view of the character.

REVERSE ANGLE = it is used to film and edit conversation: reverse angle is seen when the second speaker is on the camera.

Sizes of shots are also indicated in screenplays. They can be categorised by the field size (how much of the environment or the subject is visible, figure is also used to describe the scale) or camera placement (angle of the camera). A few examples are:

EXTREME CLOSE UP = for example an eye or chin

CLOSE UP = head and shoulder line

AMERICAN SHOT = approximately ¾ of the figure

LONG SHOT = whole environment

AERIAL SHOT = shot from above

TWO SHOT = two persons are in the pictures

LOW-ANGLE SHOT = camera is placed low on the vertical axis and is looking up

HIGH-ANGLE SHOT = camera is placed high on the vertical axis and is looking down

You can learn more about film editing and types of shots in the course "Language of media".

Titles of opening credits

BEGIN TITLES or BEGIN OPENING TITLES is followed by END TITLES or END OPENING CREDITS.

Superimpose or Title

It is used to indicate that text or an image will be placed on the screen to deliver important information. It is not used to indicate subtitles.

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EXT. CITY - DAY


Description


SUPERIMPOSE: Trnava city, Summer 2021
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Other terms:

MONTAGE – series of scenes which are related but take place in various locations.

SERIES OF SHOTS – series of scenes usually taking place in one location and concerning the same action.

INSERT – it's used to indicate focus on something important in the scene, which is too small and could not be seen otherwise: INSERT – PIECE OF PAPER

Adlib – they are used in crowd scenes, when more people talk at the same time. For example: The CROWD shouts: "You cannot do that" "It's not right!"

When person continues speaking, it can be indicated in two ways:

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                    MARRY
                 (continuing)
            You're welcome.



                    MARRY (CONT'D)
            You're welcome.
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Similarly, when the scene continues on the next page, it's indicated by

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                                    (CONTINUED)
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CONTINUED:
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Other abbreviations:
b.g. = background
CGI = computer generated image
f.g. = foreground
SFX = sound effects
SPFX = special effects
M.O.S. = without sound

Resources

MasterClass staff (November 8, 2020), How to Write a Film Treatment in 6 Steps, MasterClass, Retrieved from: https://www.masterclass.com/articles/how-to-write-a-film-treatment-in-6-steps

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