

Screenwriting Notes by Mark Mayerson

Few people can write and draw equally well. Skills use different parts of the brain. Some people (maybe most) are verbal. Others are visual. In comics, relatively few writer-artists.

Why write a script as opposed to going straight to a board? Words are fast and cheap. Write vs. draw 'car.' Write vs. draw 'roman army.'

Don't let words intimidate you. Andrew Stanton says write the scenes you want to see.

Beat outlines. One or two lines per scene. Can be plot beats or emotional beats. Quick way to get continuity down and see if it works. Some people use index cards. It's like a written storyboard. You can re-arrange and easy to add or subtract.

For Half Hour Television Scripts

Premises – 1-4 pages. Prose format.

Outline – Approximately 12 pages for a half hour. Prose format.

Script – Roughly 36 pages. Animation tends to be 1.5 to 2 pages per minute of screen time. Live action generally 1 page per minute. The difference is the amount of description.

First draft, second draft and polish. A first draft has to be solid. If not, you'll get tons of notes on it and won't be asked back. Not really a first draft. Probably the writer's second draft at least.

Three act structure. Explicit in TV. Implicit in movies. Hour long shows have 4 or 5 acts. Basically, you're always looking for some kind of cliffhanger before a commercial break so that the audience sticks around. Some shows have rigid formats, where at a certain time, you have to have a surprise or a reversal of some kind.

Content

Stories are not about plot. Plots are events. Events just don't happen. Events grow out of characters striving to achieve objectives and running into obstacles. Stories are about people and how they feel.

General rule is get into a scene as late as possible and get out as early as possible.

Exposition -(in a play, novel, etc.) dialogue, description, etc., that gives the audience or reader the background of the characters and the present situation.

Exposition is boring. No tension, conflict or suspense in exposition scenes, just information.

Does your story and each scene include the following: Setting Personality Objective Motive Conflict Obstacles Resolution Business Arc Surprise Suspense

Motive -> Objective -> Obstacles (conflict) -> success or failure. Arc of whole story and arc of each individual scene.

David Mamet quote: "a. Make them wonder. b. Answer their question in a way both surprising and inevitable." Inevitable is maybe too strong a word. Replace it with believability.

Screenwriting Realities

Screenwriting without producing or directing is a recipe for frustration. In animated TV, writers do not interact with anybody except for story editors and only gets notes from story editors, producers and broadcasters. Writers have no influence whatsoever on storyboard, animation, etc. In live action film making, once the script is delivered, the producers have the right to call in other writers to rewrite you. It may get to the point where you have to go to arbitration to get credit for your work, if it's a WGA project. Even so, there are screenwriters who feel that the arbitration process has cheated them. In any case, live writers don't get the opportunity to be on the set or sit in on editing.

Notes – rarely improve things, often change things without making them better, sometimes make them worse. Notes are often contradictory. Producer says one thing, broadcaster says another. Writer is stuck trying to make it work.

Screenwriting Resource Sheet

"There's only one rule in film making. Don't bore the audience."

-Billy Wilder

Books

Story by Robert McKee. Published by ReganBooks. Something of an industry standard, though many people think it oversimplifies story structure.

The Way of the Screenwriter by Amnon Buchbinder. Published by Anansi Press. A York U. professor who has also written and directed independent feature films. One of the better screenwriting books I've read and not as mystical as the title implies.

Crafty TV Writing: Thinking Inside the Box by Alex Epstein. Published by Owl Books. *Crafty Screenwriting: Writing Movies That Get Made* by Alex Epstein. Published by H. Holt. I've only read the screenwriting book, but it's good. See Epstein's blog below.

Websites

www.wordplayer.com - Terry Rossio and Ted Elliot, the screenwriters behind Shrek, Zorro and Pirates of the Carribean 1. The site includes a series of essays on screenwriting as well as a forum that discusses scripts of recent releases.

www.artfulwriter.com - Craig Mazin and (again) Ted Elliot. Mazin was the producer/writer of Scary Movie 3 and the upcoming animated Opus film. Advice to screenwriters.

www.complicationsensue.blogspot.com - Alex Epstein is co-creator of the TV series Naked Josh and did a rewrite on Bon Cop/Bad Cop. Authored two of the books above. Advice to screenwriters.

www.heywriterboy.blogspot.com - Denis McGrath, Canadian TV writer. Reflections on TV, Canadian TV and writing.

All the above websites contain links to other writing sites.

www.wga.org - The Writers Guild of America. See the guild minimums for various kinds of writing. Interviews with writers. You can register scripts here for protection.

www.wgc.ca - The Writers Guild of Canada. See the guild minimums for various kinds of writing. You can register scripts here for protection.

www.animationguild.org - The Los Angeles animation union, which covers writers of non-prime time animation.

Screenwriting Software

I don't recommend buying this stuff. You can easily make do with Microsoft Word using styles to get the correct screenwriting format. However, I'm listing these because they are the standards within the industry and you should know what they are.

Finaldraft.com - *Final Draft*.

Storymind.com - *Movie Magic Screenwriter*

Format (Courier font)

INT. A CLASSROOM. MORNING.

The students are half asleep. Some have their heads down on their desks. Others are drinking coffee. PROFESSOR JONES, age 60, enters and goes to the lectern.

JONES

Please pass your projects
to the front.

The students look up but nobody reaches for a project.

JONES (CONT'D)

(annoyed)

Did you hear me? Pass up
your projects!

SMITH (O.S.)

Professor, can I see you a minute?

SMITH is in the hallway outside the classroom. Jones walks out to talk to him.

INT. HALLWAY. CONTINUOUS.

SMITH

Those aren't your students.

Jones looks surprised.

JONES (V.O.)

That was the first time I realized
I was having a breakdown.