

Screenwriting



How to Write a Screenplay

A Practical Guide and
Exercises to Write
your Screenplay

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guide FILM, TV & MEDIA

Introduction

You're reading this now because you've probably said at some point, "I should write a screenplay." You have a great idea for a TV series or a movie, but that's all it is right now. An idea. Now that you're ready to sit down and write it, where to start? A blank screen stares you in the face, giving you the realization that all the ideas, all the words, have to become formulated into a cohesive script.

Famed author Roald Dahl once said, "I don't care if a reader hates one of my stories, just as long as he finishes the book." The same can be applied to movies. Love it or hate it, it still starts with a finished script.

The key to writing is "write what you know." And then once you decide to write what you know, you have to write. This doesn't mean writing about only the subjects you know, but rather

more about putting your experiences into the characters and stories you create.

This book, which contains concrete examples and more than 30 exercises, will guide you through the steps you need to craft a cohesive structure, from developing your characters, organising your ideas, creating the elements of your story, and more.

Film genres

When you think of types of movies, there are several main categories, each with their own unique characteristics. These are known as genres. Some examples of categories are family films, horror, animation and comedy. Most are works of fiction, although biography and documentary are also genres.

Even with biographies, there may be some fictionalized elements for the sake of storytelling. While they say to never let the truth stand in the way of a good story, it's important to note when fictional elements are used in the story. Often, this is denoted by "based on a true story." As a writer, you can give the accounting of a true story as it unfolds, with different versions possible from different points of view. Film genres are not absolute. Many cross over from one to another, although one genre format will likely be dominant. A suspense movie can also be a romantic comedy. Then there is the comedy-drama, known as a dramedy. Think about the films you enjoy watching. When you prepare to write your screenplay, to which genre is your idea most similar? Writers find that, especially when starting out for the first time, the genres they enjoy watching are often the ones that are most enjoyable to write. Let's look at some popular film genres.

Action-Adventure

An action-adventure film has a protagonist who takes a journey with some risk involved to accomplish a goal.

Generally, action-adventures are most popular worldwide and generate the highest box office returns. New screenwriters tend to choose action-adventure (along with horror and comedy) as the first genre they write because the demand for these types of scripts are highest.

Example: Examples of this type of film would be *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Die Hard*, and *The Hunger Games*.

Comedy

This is a broad genre that includes several sub-genres. A comedy is a film with a series of funny events. Sub-genres include:

- Romantic comedy – two characters who usually meet, break up, then get back

together. Smart, witty dialogue is usually more important than the overall plot.

- Screwball comedy – Made popular in the 1940s, they usually have the female character dominate the male character and occur in farcical situations.
- Satire – different from a parody, satires are social criticism where something is held up to ridicule.
- Parody – a spoof of an original work.

Here are some Examples of each of the sub-genres listed:

Romantic comedy – *When Harry Met Sally*, *Pretty Woman*, and *Crazy, Stupid Love*

Screwball comedy – *Bringing Up Baby*, *The Philadelphia Story*, and *My Man Godfrey*

Satire – *Modern Times*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, and *Jojo Rabbit*

Parody – *Airplane!*, *Scary Movie*, and *The Death of Stalin*

Horror

Horror plays on the audience's fears by startling them in some way, be it supernatural or macabre. There are various sub-genres such as the monster movie, ghost story, action, and slasher movies. Horror films can be made on smaller budgets and rarely lose popularity. In fact, some of the most profitable films are of the horror genre.

Example: Examples of horror films would be *Frankenstein* (monster movie), *The Others* (ghost), *Ghost Rider* (action), and *Saw* (slasher).

Fantasy

While fantasy can be a sub-genre of horror, when we think of a film in the fantasy genre, we tend to think of more of the magical and supernatural elements than a horror element. These can be dark fantasy, fairy tales, legends and more.

Note the difference between Fantasy and Science Fiction. Fantasy is usually mystical and supernatural while sci-fi is based on an element of science and can be explained through scientific terminology and technology.

Example: Examples of fantasy films are: *Pan's Labyrinth* (dark fantasy), *Alice in Wonderland* (fairy tale), and *Lord of the Rings* (legend).

Examples of science fiction are: *Alien* (sci-fi horror), *Star Wars* (sci-fi action-adventure or space opera) and *Planet of the Apes* (sci-fi thriller)

Drama

Dramas have many sub-genres. This would include detective stories (including its own sub-genres such as “film noir”), legal dramas, mysteries, romantic dramas, political dramas, historical dramas, and more.

Examples of well-known dramas are:

- Crime drama – *The Maltese Falcon* (also noir)

- Legal Drama – *A Few Good Men*
- Mystery – *Rear Window*
- Romantic Drama – *Love Story*
- Political Drama – *Frost/Nixon*
- Historical Drama – *Lincoln*



Exercise 1

Make a list of ten of your favorite movies. What genre are they and why are they on your list? List out the elements of those screenplays that are key to their specific genre. Then, list out the elements that you plan to use in your screenplay.



Think about why you enjoy these films. If you like romance, it should be more than you like stories about romantic couples. What is it about this particular story that stands out? Can you use these elements in your story? How would you make it different?