

1983

## Writing the screenplay: An investigation into the craft

Thomas E. Leonard  
*University of Northern Iowa*

*Let us know how access to this document benefits you*

Copyright ©1983 Thomas E. Leonard

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Leonard, Thomas E., "Writing the screenplay: An investigation into the craft" (1983). *Graduate Research Papers*. 2748.

<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/2748>

This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uni.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uni.edu).

**Offensive Materials Statement:** Materials located in UNI ScholarWorks come from a broad range of sources and time periods. Some of these materials may contain offensive stereotypes, ideas, visuals, or language.

---

## Writing the screenplay: An investigation into the craft

### Abstract

The lure of the motion picture is one that touches millions of people worldwide. It transcends political, religious, cultural, and national boundaries. The basic component of this lure is the actual experience of viewing a motion picture. People go to the cinema for many reasons, mainly for entertainment, but watching a motion picture also satisfies certain psychological needs such as belonging, participation, and fantasy role playing. For the majority of people the role of viewer is their only involvement with motion pictures. There is, however, a select group of people for whom the act of viewing is merely a catalyst for further involvement in motion pictures. Some may dream of becoming an actor or actress, others may aspire to be film critics and historians, and then there are those who desire an active participation in the production process. It is with the latter that the focus of this study begins to develop.

Writing the Screenplay

An Investigation into the Craft

A Research Paper

Submitted to

The Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

By

Thomas E. Leonard

28 April 1983

This Research Paper by: Thomas E. Leonard

Entitled: Writing the Screenplay: An Investigation Into the Craft

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

Roger A. Kueter

April 26, 1983  
Date Approved

Director of Research Paper

Robert R. Hardman

April 27, 1983  
Date Approved

Reader of Research Paper

Robert R. Hardman

April 27, 1983  
Date Received

Graduate Faculty Advisor

Charles R. May

May 11, 1983  
Date Received

Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>	
CHAPTER I:	INTRODUCTION	1
	Introduction to the Problem	1
	Statement of the Problem	3
CHAPTER II:	REVIEW OF LITERATURE	7
	Introduction to Literature Review	7
	Literature Review	10
	Script Development	10
	Research	16
	Characterization and Dialogue	17
	Format	22
	Work Methods	25
	Marketing	26
	Summary	27
CHAPTER III:	SUMMARY	29
	Introduction to the Summary	29
	Summary	29
BIBLIOGRAPHY		33
APPENDICE I:	IMPORTANT ADDRESSES	34

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Problem

The lure of the motion picture is one that touches millions of people worldwide. It transcends political, religious, cultural, and national boundaries. The basic component of this lure is the actual experience of viewing a motion picture. People go to the cinema for many reasons, mainly for entertainment, but watching a motion picture also satisfies certain psychological needs such as belonging, participation, and fantasy role playing. For the majority of people the role of viewer is their only involvement with motion pictures. There is, however, a select group of people for whom the act of viewing is merely a catalyst for further involvement in motion pictures. Some may dream of becoming an actor or actress, others may aspire to be film critics and historians, and then there are those who desire an active participation in the production process. It is with the latter that the focus of this study begins to develop.

The production of a motion picture can be as simple as a person filming home movies, or as complex as a multi-million dollar theatrical feature employing a crew of hundreds. Regardless of the size of the production, there are certain functions that need to be fulfilled in order to ensure successful completion of a picture. The most important being: producer, writer, director, cinematographer, and editor. For the individual with the desire to create a motion picture, but with limited funds

to do so, the delegation of these functions usually falls to themselves. This is probably the best way to learn about the techniques of film production. Valuable skills are learned and the filmmaker develops the ability to conceptualize the various components of production and how they relate to the film project as a whole. For the individual seriously interested in the production of motion pictures there will come a time when a decision must be made as to the role of film in their chosen career.

This decision will raise a number of questions that need to be answered. Should I pursue my own personal films part-time or should I seek full-time employment in a professional production company? What function in a production crew do I have competency in - writing, direction, etc., and which function do I want to perform? Besides these important questions there is also the consideration of what type of film to work on. There are many areas of concentration: animation, documentary, experimental, instructional, and the theatrical feature are just a few. Out of all the areas of filmmaking though, the one that is the hardest, and the most desirable to break into, is the theatrical feature.

Perhaps the one word that is best associated with the production of feature motion pictures is Hollywood. Hollywood - the name conjures up images of movie stars, glamour, fame, and of course, money. For many filmmakers it is the image of Hollywood that set them on their path to making films with the

goal of becoming a Hollywood film director. Those people who have such inclinations, however, should first wipe the stars from their eyes and take note of the harsh realities of the marketplace. Employment in the motion picture industry is extremely competitive, especially in the area of film direction. The total yearly output of feature films from the major studios numbers about 100, so the opportunity for employment is also limited. Despite these discouraging facts hundreds of potential film directors flock to Hollywood to vie for the few openings. Obviously what is needed is more than just a desire; one must have a driving passion in order to face these odds. Of course, talent and sheer luck play major roles, but for the individual who is bound and determined to try, the only question is, What course of action do I follow to realize my goal of directing feature motion pictures?

#### Statement of the Problem

There are a number of ways to try to break into the motion picture industry. Lacking a rich relative or a key contact, many people determined to break in will usually go to Los Angeles and get a toehold in any way possible, in hopes of finding that big break. Industry insiders caution against this type of action since many entry level jobs offer little in the way of career advancement. Individuals employing this approach should have a copy of the Pacific Coast Studio Directory, the "yellow pages" of the motion picture industry. They should also expect frus-



tration, disappointment and many "dues" to pay.

Although few training or intern programs exist there are a couple that offer possibilities. The American Film Institute Academy Internship Program, funded by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, can provide a valuable experience for filmmakers by allowing them to observe and work alongside established directors for the production of feature or television films. There is also an Assistant Directors Training Program offered in a joint venture between the Directors Guild of America and the Association of Motion Picture and Television Producers. This program provides a training period of 400 work days and is a paid full time position. There are also weekly seminars that the trainee is required to attend. Upon completion of the program the trainee's name is placed on the Industry Qualifications List making them eligible for hire as a Second Assistant Director. It should be noted that an assistant director's duties are in the administrative and managerial procedures in motion picture production, and in no way is to be considered a stepping-stone to becoming a director. There is always an exception to the rule and it is possible for a talented and determined individual to move up to director status, but this is not the usual career move for assistant directors. Both the intern and training program are highly competitive, for the assistant directors program there are approximately 1300 applications received each year and only 10-20 are accepted as trainees.

So far the prospects for breaking into the motion picture industry do not look bright, and for most people they never will. But even though Hollywood is a tough nut to crack, it is not impossible. Consider for a moment an analogy. There are two people, one wants to become president of the United States and the other wants to become a feature film director. Because of the competitive nature of their desired professions neither person is offered any guarantee that they will succeed in their endeavors. And yet the only way that either person will find out is if they try. Of course, it takes more than just exerting an effort to achieve success. The successful individual will initiate a plan of action that will increase his chances of reaching his goal. For the person with hopes of becoming a film director this usually means attending college and receiving a degree. A college education can be very valuable in developing skills that would be useful to a future film director. College also provides a formal education that would allow a person to pursue employment in other areas if their bid for Hollywood fails.

For the film oriented person a background in visual communications would definitely be advantageous. One skill that should be developed and nurtured while in college is that of good writing, for it is through writing that the budding film director may possibly have his best opportunity in realizing his dreams. There is one thing that Hollywood needs constantly, and that is good screenplays. The screenplay is the blueprint for any film; without it there is no film. True, that without the magic touch

of the director and scores of other professionals, the screenplay would simply be words on a page, but nonetheless the screenplay is the point from which a film physically advances. It would be wise for the potential director to study and write screenplays for they would be able to better understand the development of a film story and how it works. A great many directors got their start by writing screenplays. A recent example of this can be seen with Lawrence Kasdan. For nine years he wrote screenplays and finally he sold one, Continental Divide. This led to his working with George Lucas (Star Wars) on The Raiders of the Lost Ark screenplay. His directorial debut came with his third screenplay, Body Heat. (American Film, April 1982, pp. 10) His success on his screenplays allowed him to write his own ticket and get into directing. Therefore, it is the intention of this study to focus upon the craft of the screenplay writer in order to allow the potential director an opportunity to break into the motion picture industry.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction to the Literature Review

For the individual who aspires to work in the creative field of directing in the motion picture industry, it does not take long to realize that it will be a long tough haul with no guarantee of success. The very image of Hollywood and the motion picture industry traditionally draw more people than the industry can support. The function of director in the production process is a coveted role and is perhaps the position that most people seek. The individual who embarks on this career goal needs to have an all-consuming passion for film, the ability to take setbacks and to bounce back, an incredible amount of talent, and lady luck in their back pocket. One way for a filmmaker to increase his chances on breaking in is to learn the art of screenplay writing.

While screenplay writing is probably just as tough to break into as directing, there are some definite advantages to attempting to write before directing. Writing screenplays, whether sold or not, allows for an understanding of how the film story works. Plots are developed, characters are created, the entire structure of the film can be laid out and studied. While it would be best for the screenplay writer to reside in southern California, it is not required as for television writers. Anyway, for the beginner any place is a good place to start. One can sit at home wherever that may be and type away on his free time. He can take as long as he wants to perfect his screenplay, and

when he is done, he will have a finished product, something that will represent his creative work. Generally, a beginner's first screenplay will be done on speculation. This means that the writer is submitting his work in the hopes that a producer will think it is worth making a movie out of it. Many times writers will be contracted to write a script on the basis of a producer's idea. Very often that first script will go unsold but this is not altogether bad, for it is through that first script that the writer represents himself. A producer may not think that the writer's script will make a good film, but he can tell from what is written whether the writer understands the techniques of the screenplay writing and may offer the writer a job on another script.

For the beginning writer who decides to seriously write screenplays the main problem is where to start. Many colleges and universities offer courses in screenplay writing, but for many people this way is not open to them. There are a number of books available about the process of screenplay writing and for the beginner this is a good place to start. The only problem is that it is too easy to sit and dream about writing that great script than to actually sit down and write it. The question is, When to start writing? There are some writers who will say just to sit down and write, while others will say to study the craft carefully and when you are ready, then begin to write. It all depends on the individual; write when you feel you are ready to write. But be careful, plunging into writing blindly can cause

a lot of frustration and can result in wasted time. Learning how to write properly involves more than just writing; you also need to study other writers' work and read about what they say about writing. With the advent of cable television on a national scale the beginning writer has at his disposal dozens of films to view and study each month. View as many films as possible to see how others write and to see what is being produced. The main objective of this study is to examine selected sources of information concerning screenplay writing, and to establish some basic fundamental guidelines for the beginner to follow. This collating of material into one source will allow the beginning writer to concentrate earlier on the writing of screenplays rather than searching for information.

The literature review is comprised of source materials that explain the basic techniques behind screenplay writing. Since all screenplay writers have different ideas as to what constitutes a good screenplay, sources have also been used in which established professionals are interviewed concerning their craft. The material is organized into six areas. Script development covers story concept, and the basic structure of the screenplay. The next area is that of research; the need for proper research is essential in creating a believable story. The third area details the development of characters and dialogue. Characters need to be real and ones that the audience can identify with. Dialogue needs to be written so that it sounds natural and not written. Format examines the written look of a screen-

play. This is very important since utilizing the wrong format will label the writer as inexperienced and will often be the reason for his screenplay not being read. The area of work methods will look at the problem of actually getting started, how to get those first words down on paper, and what to do when mental blocks develop. Marketing deals with selling that very important first script. How to get an agent and initiating that first sale. In no way is this study to be thought of as a comprehensive overview of screenplay writing. It is meant to be a guide for the beginning writer, a catalyst for getting his first screenplay written. It is hoped that the writer will continue to strive to perfect his craft by reading and studying the works of other writers.

## Literature Review

### I. Script Development

The first step in developing a script is to start with a story idea. This is not as easy as it might seem. When questioned about the tough part of writing, writer and director Paul Schrader replied:

Getting an idea. A metaphor. Having one or two lines that describe a film--that's the hardest part. Once you get that, if you have any common sense, you can execute it. That's very cavalier of me to say, because I've run across people who have had very good ideas but who just cannot execute them for reasons that I can't understand. It seems to me that if people are given a scene, it's the easiest thing in the world to pull off the scene... Certainly I'm being cavalier in saying it's easy. For some people it's not that easy. (Brady, 1981, pp. 282)

Screenplay writer Wells Root suggests that there is no such thing as an original story. In his book, Writing the Script (Root, 1979, chapter 8), Root states that there are only 36 basic dramatic situations. These would include the disaster, the predestined tragedy (someone is going to die), and many more. These basic situations have been the tools of writers and storytellers since man began his existence on earth. These same tools are available to the writer of screenplays. It is in the development of the story line where talent is needed. Because the actual success of a film lies in box office returns, it is essential that the story line is one that will draw people into the theatre. It has to have a mass appeal to the public.

Many times the story idea is referred to as the concept. The concept is a unifying thread that runs through the entire film. It is what the film is all about and can be capsulized in just a few sentences. A handy method is to use the "what if" question. For example, what if a little girl were possessed by the devil? The result, The Exorcist. What if a shark started terrorizing a small tourist town on the coast? The film Jaws is one of the all time highest grossing films. This can be done with any film. Just think of the story line and put it into a "what if" question. A good concept will allow the writer to maintain an overview of the film as a whole at all times.

After the story line or concept is established the physical structure of the screenplay needs to be dealt with. Basically a screenplay is just a story and like all stories it has a



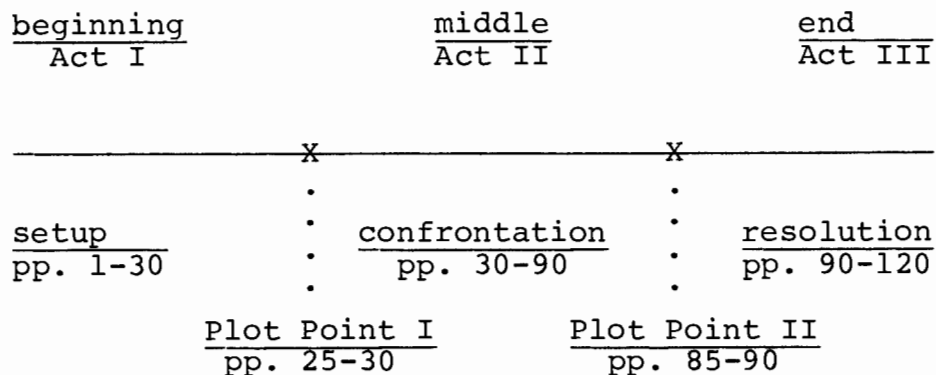
beginning, middle, and an end. This is the three act design. Novelist and screenplay writer Ernest Lehman (North by Northwest, West Side Story, The Sound of Music) describes the basic ingredients he looks for in each act:

In the first act, who are the people, what is the situation of this whole story? Second act is the progression of that situation to a point of high conflict and great problems. And the third act is how the conflicts and problems are resolved. That's putting it a little patly, but that's the way it ought to be. (Brady, 1981, pp. 203-204)

A good way of looking at the three act design is to think of act I as the setup, act II as the confrontation, and act III as the resolution. Act I introduces the main character and supporting characters. In this act the protagonist (the main character, hero, good guy) is faced with a problem or crisis, what Lehman refers to as the situation of the story. The protagonist has a goal to reach, but he is not to reach too easily or maybe not at all. This is where the antagonist enters the picture. In act II the antagonist attempts to stop the protagonist from reaching his goal. The antagonist sets up what are called "counterthrusts" (Goodman, 1982, chapter 4). These counterthrusts force the protagonist into action and in return his action causes the antagonist to act again. This thrusting and counterthrusting by the protagonist and the antagonist is what moves the story along. It creates suspense and generates excitement. Act III is where everything comes to a head, either the protagonist reaches his goal or he fails in the process. A good strong dramatic ending resolves the story and makes it comprehensible and complete.

In his book Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting

(Field, 1982, pp. 8), Syd Field suggests the use of a paradigm in visualizing the basic linear structure of a screenplay. A paradigm for a screenplay would be as follows:



This model shows the number of pages of the screenplay that correspond with the length of each act. This number is not fixed, it is just a guide to follow in structuring the screenplay. Also shown are plot points. Every story can contain any number of plot points but these are special ones. A plot point is an event or incident that advances the story forward. Plot points I and II occur at the end of act I and II. They are transitional plot points because they advance the story into the next act. Field states that this model should fit all good screenplays. The screenplay writer should keep the paradigm model in mind while viewing films. How long does it take to complete the setup? At what point in the film do the plot points appear? The serious writer will be doing this all the time, increasing his awareness and comprehension of the film structure. Keep in mind, however, that the paradigm model is not a rigid structure that one must absolutely adhere to. It is merely a guide, a flexible structure

that can change according to the needs of the script.

The process of constructing a motion picture that tells a story smoothly, coherently, and logically is known as pictorial continuity. Pictorial continuity is "the proper development and connection of motion picture sequences to create a smoothly joined, coherent motion picture story." (Gaskill and Englander, 1906, pp. 7) Notice the word sequences in the above definition for they are the very essence of a screenplay. The screenplay is nothing but a series of sequences that tell a story. The average motion picture will contain about 50-60 sequences total; certain sequences comprise the setup, confrontation, and the resolution. Using the linear structure of the paradigm the screenplay writer can lay out a series of sequences. Some writers utilize treatments and outlines to help establish the sequences; while this is not absolutely necessary it does help. It all depends on the writer's method. Writer and director Joan Tewkesbury (Nashville, Thieves Like Us) describes how she goes about developing a script:

I do an outline, and then I do a step treatment that is pretty detailed. Step treatments for me can be twenty pages long. They consist of simple paragraphs that get you from one place to the next place to the next place...I write scenes to the step treatment. It is the most important thing I do. It is the structure...I pin stuff up on a wall so that I can either follow it horizontally around a room or up and down--it depends on the movie. It's weird, but it does work. (American Film, March 1979, pp. 39)

Writer Thomas Rickman (Hooper, Coal Miner's Daughter) describes his method for developing a script:

I try to have an organic structure, by starting with scenes rather than a plot outline. So that whatever happens next comes out of the scene, and not merely the demands of the plot. You want the story to grow rather than have the growth forced on it. And you want to make your transitions fresh and surprising. (American Film, July-August 1981, pp. 60)

While the director has the shot as the basic unit of the motion picture, the writer has the sequence for the basic unit of the screenplay. Many directors use a storyboard to help them previsualize the shots they will use to construct a sequence. Scriptwriters also can use a type of sequence storyboarding to construct their screenplay. Joan Tewkesbury's method of pinning stuff up on a wall is an example of this. Quite often note cards will be employed to help lay out the structure. Paul Schrader uses a method that he calls charting:

I draw up charts before I do a script. I endlessly chart and rechart a movie. Before I sit down to write, I have all the scenes listed, what happens in each scene, how many pages I anticipate each scene will take. I have a running log on the film. I can look down and see what happens by page thirty, what happens by page forty, fifty, sixty, and so forth. (Brady, 1981, pp. 283)

Before the first word is written structure must be established. The writer needs to have a story idea or concept and then sequences must be constructed to build the setup, to create conflict for the confrontation, and to provide an ending for the resolution. Setting up structure helps to provide a type of road map for the writer so that he can see from where he is starting and where he will end up at. The writer of a good

screenplay will know how the story will end before he types the first scene.

## II. Research

For many writers the joy of writing is in research. Writing more often than not is done alone; the writer is in isolation. Research allows the writer to get out into the world to see, feel, and talk with his subject. The importance of research cannot be underestimated. Once a subject is chosen and the concept established, it is time to begin the research process. The writer needs to be able to create a realistic story. Research helps to find ideas, develop a sense of people, situations, and locale. Virtually every writer does research. How much and for how long depends on each individual writer. Scriptwriter Fay Kanin (Hustling, Friendly Fire) has a response to a question about how much research she does that is probably typical of most scriptwriters:

A lot. First of all, because I like to learn about things. When I commit to a subject, I want to learn everything there is to know about it. I want to fill up the barrel till it's overflowing. I somehow recognize the point at which I know enough that I can sit down and write. And I really can't write till I feel that. (American Film, March 1980, pp. 61)

Research includes searching libraries for information, talking with people and recording interviews, taking notes from observations, and reading books, magazines, and newspapers. The whole purpose of research is that it is an acquisition of

information. The more information the better. The writer does not have to use it all, but by having a large amount of information the writer has more to draw from during the writing process. Novelist and screenplay writer Mario Puzo (Godfather, Superman) comments on the value of research:

Research is tremendously important. I did an enormous amount of research on Earthquake, and it was tremendously helpful to me when I wrote the screenplay...If you know a lot about something, you're much more comfortable with it. You use the material any way you like. It gives you ideas, it sparks your imagination. (American Film, May 1979, pp. 39)

The hardest part of writing is knowing what to write and by doing the proper research beforehand, the screenplay writer can eliminate many problems that would crop up otherwise. Research cannot be ignored. With today's film audiences, expectations are high and the screenplay writer is expected to keep up with them. Researching details, facts and information add an edge of realism to the film story. The writer is a communicator - the more you know, the more you can communicate.

### III. Characterization and Dialogue

Creating characters for the screenplay that are believable is a hard task to accomplish, and yet it is so vital since the screenplay revolves around the characters. Syd Field offers some valuable information, in his book on screenwriting, about the development of characters. (Field, 1982, chapter 3) First of all, there are three different ways that characters interact.

The first one is that they experience conflict in achieving their dramatic need. Obstacles are placed in their path. Secondly, they interact with other characters. It is through interaction that conflict develops, and it is with conflict that drama develops. Finally, they interact with themselves. Internal conflicts make the character more human. We all have them, fears, anxieties, and the like, and we can readily identify with a character who also has them.

In trying to develop characters that seem real and who have depth, it is a good idea to separate the character's life into three areas: professional, personal, and private. The three P's. Professional describes what the character does. Is he a banker or a bum? What are his relationships with his co-workers? These questions help to establish a personality and the character's point of view. Personal describes the character's intimate details. Is he married, single, divorced, or maybe homosexual? What changes in his life have placed him where he is at in his life? The answers to these questions can provide many dramatic possibilities. Private describes what the character does when alone. What do they like to do, what are their interests? It is helpful to write a biography sketch of the character incorporating the three ways characters interact and the three P's. It is also useful to give a character a dominant characteristic. It could be a strength or a tragic flaw, but whatever the dominant characteristic can be a key point around which a

character is developed. It is helpful in portraying the character as an individual.

In order to write dialogue well it is important to recognize its purpose. The primary function of dialogue is to reveal information to the audience. Every word has a purpose, and that is to move the film forward. It has been said that much of writing is rewriting. This is especially true for dialogue. The screenplay writer needs to edit his dialogue down so that only that which is really needed remains. Take caution when dealing with exposition, the telling of facts. Excessive use of exposition is a sure sign of a poorly written script. Remember that film is primarily visual, never say what you can show. Exposition can be woven into characters dialogue skillfully so that the audience is not even aware of it. Screenwriter Ernest Lehman comments on methods he uses to convey information without its seeming expository:

One of the tricks is to have the exposition conveyed in a scene of conflict, so that a character is forced to say things you want the audience to know--as, for example, if he is defending himself against somebody's attack, his words of defense seem justified even though his words are actually expository words. Something appears to be happening, so the audience believes it is witnessing a scene (which it is), not listening to expository speeches. A scene, to me, has to have some element of conflict in it or some cross-purpose. It doesn't have to be a quarrel, but there should be some kind of tension. The most obvious are scenes involving opposing viewpoints...conflict is an excellent device for conveying exposition. Humor is another way of getting it across.  
(Brady, 1981, pp. 182-183)



Dialogue needs to have rhythm and cadence. This not only helps to set each character's dialogue as individual, but also helps to move the film along. Each character's words should act as a springboard for the next line that follows. In the motion picture industry good dialogue that works is known as dialogue that "plays". An important note to remember is that while the writer sees the words on paper, the audience has to hear them. Dialogue needs to be short and to the point. Some writers recommend that on the whole the character's lines should be no more than seven words long. Some actors can handle long lines of dialogue while others can't. Sometimes long sentences can bore or confuse the audience.

One tool that the writer has at his disposal to help them learn dialogue is his ears. Listening is an excellent way of learning realistic dialogue. Jot down phrases that you hear on the street or use a tape recorder. Remember though, normal speech patterns utilize a lot of unnecessary filler words such as "uh", "um" or "you know". Eliminate these words because although the audience uses these filler words in it's everyday speech patterns, it does not want to hear it up on the screen. The trick to writing dialogue is to make it sound like it is natural when it really isn't. When writing dialogue it is best to avoid clichés and overly accented speech. Also avoid using speech that may be a fad at the time of writing, but may go out of use quick. Nothing dates a film more than using speech that has gone out of use. Considering the time that it takes to

write and sell a script, it may be possible that fad dialogue that has not stood the test of time may make the script unsellable.

For some writers dialogue comes easy; for others it is a laborious process. Like other areas of writing it takes time and practice to become competent at dialogue writing. Perhaps the one element of the screenplay that is changed the most when a film goes into production is the dialogue. Maybe the director thinks a certain line is inappropriate and orders it to be changed. Or an actor is uncomfortable with his lines and improvises. Whatever the reason for a change the writer of screenplays needs to be aware that his screenplay will be subject to change during the production stage of a film. In closing this section on characterization and dialogue it would be helpful to hear from an established professional to gain some insight on the writing of dialogue. The late scriptwriter Paddy Chayefsky (Marty, The Hospital, Network) comments on how he writes dialogue for his scripts:

I write laboriously worked-out dialogue. There's no tape recording involved at all...My dialogue is precise. And it's true. I think out the truth of what people are saying and why they're saying it...Dialogue comes because I know what I want my characters to say. I envision the scene; I can imagine them up there on the screen; I try to imagine what they would be saying and how they would be saying it, and I keep it in character. And the dialogue comes out of that. I think that goes for every writer in the world. Then I rewrite it. Then I cut it. Then I refine it until I get the scene as precise as I can get it. (Brady, 1981, pp. 61-62)

#### IV. Format

Quite simply format refers to the written form of a screenplay. This is very important for the beginning scriptwriter. If a screenplay is submitted in the improper format, no matter how good of a story it is or how much money the writer thinks it will bring in, it will not be sold. Chances are that it probably won't even be read. Many times a script will be read by a reader, someone who physically examines the huge piles of scripts that are submitted. The reader passes on those scripts that he thinks will be worth spending production money on. A script submitted in improper format will identify the writer as inexperienced, a novice, and will be deposited in the "circular file". First of all, correct format mandates a typewritten script. Clean paper and sharp, crisp type are a must. Many producers and readers will simply throw away scripts that are dirty or have unclear type. They won't waste their time, they have hundreds of other scripts awaiting their consideration. In this business first impressions mean everything. Professional screenplay writers have at their disposal the services of a professional script typing service. They never type up their final draft to be submitted to their agent, always the typing service. It is also rather expensive, three dollars a page. For the beginner, unless you have money to spare, it is best to learn the correct format and type it yourself.

The format for the screenplay is actually very simple,

although some writers use a slightly varied format. The use of the master scene script is most common. As the name implies, the master scene script is just a listing of scenes that construct the screenplay. Each scene is broken into three parts: the scenic heading, the descriptions and directions, and the dialogue. The scenic heading gives three bits of information. First, whether the scene is outside or inside, known as exterior or interior, and abbreviated as EXT. and INT. Secondly, the location. Where the action is taking place. No need to be specific - if the location is a city street, just state - city street. The last bit of information is the relative time of day such as morning, afternoon, evening, and night. The scenic heading gives all this information in one line. This is an important line for when the script is sent to the budgeting department they analyze the scenes to determine production costs. For example, exterior scenes cost more to shoot than interior scenes. The scenic heading is typed in upper case letters. Descriptions and directions are typed in upper and lower case letters across the page, from margin to margin if necessary. It is in this part where the physical descriptions of the characters are given along with their actions. The mood of the setting is described and any specific directions for the scene are stated. All dialogue, and cues for how dialogue should be spoken, are typed in a narrow column, approximately three inches wide, in the center of the page. An additional note on the

scenic heading, after the relative time of day has been established in one scene it does not have to be written again until the time of day changes. In his book, The Filmscript: A Writer's Guide (Giustini, 1980, pp. 34), Rolando Giustini shows an example of a master scene script. This sample will illustrate the format:

INT. - BAR - EARLY EVENING  
As the BARMAID, an attractive brunette in her late twenties, hands Joe the beer:

JOE  
It better be good.

BARMAID  
(saucy)  
Well, if you don't like it, just bring it back.

This example is for illustration purposes only. To get a true picture of a professionally typed script, it is best to get a copy of a published screenplay in order to study it.

Another way for a beginner's script to be labeled as the work of an amateur is to include an abundance of camera angles and directions for the cameraman. It is not the writer's job to tell the director what shots to use and where and how to place the camera. Just tell the story and leave its direction to the director. There are subtle ways to hint at specific shots if they are essential to the story. For example: He fingered the shotglass. This line indicates a close-up without actually saying close-up. Don't clutter up your copy with directions the director will probably ignore.

## V. Work Methods

Establishing a working method in the writing of screenplays is something that each writer must do by himself. Every writer has different methods that work best for them and the beginning writer must find one that works best for him. Working methods refer to the way a script is approached and the actual writing of the script. As mentioned previously in this study the first step in script development is to secure a storyline or concept that can be stated in a line or two. After this an outline and treatment is written. It is not necessary for a treatment to be written, although many writers find it helpful. An outline usually is a must, the writer needs to establish his scenes and place them in order. After this research is done. Research will flesh out the scenes and possibly help to create new ones. After all the preparatory work is done it is time to type the script.

Writing is a lonely and hard profession. It requires much discipline. Again, how the writer disciplines himself is up to the individual. Some writers move into a hotel and don't leave until the script is finished. Others work at home for a few hours a day and proceed at a slower pace. It all depends on the writer. There will be days when the writer can't write anything, and there will be days when the words will flow. For the beginning writer it would be best to set up a schedule for your writing and stick to it. Most writers will write in the morning

when they are fresh and their creative energy is flowing. Some will write at all times of the day. Whatever, it is important to set up a specific time of the day for writing. The best thing that the beginning writer can do is to read about other scriptwriters and the hints and suggestions they give about their work methods.

## VI. Marketing

Marketing is something that the beginning writer does not have to worry about until he has that first script in hand and is ready to submit for consideration. The first step in marketing your writing is to find an agent. It is an absolute necessity to have an agent in order to get a screenplay sold. Studios and producers make it a policy not to receive unsolicited material. They only accept scripts submitted by an agent. Agents help to filter out some of the bad scriptwriting, since they don't make any money unless they get a writer's script sold. Agents will only represent clients whose scripts have the promise of being sold. This is why the beginning scriptwriter needs to send in his very best work to represent himself.

The best way to start the search for an agent to represent your work is to contact the Writers Guild of America West. For one dollar the Guild will provide a list of qualified agents, but the new writer is not free to select just any agent on the list. Agents with an asterisk before their names are agents who will consider material from new writers. These are

the ones to contact. Never send a script without first making initial contact. Write a letter or phone. If the agent is interested, he'll ask you to send your script; if not, contact another agent. Selling that first script can be anxious time. If no agent wants to represent your script consider a different story to write. If you are seriously interested in writing screenplays a few rejections should not discourage you.

It is a good idea for the writer to have protection on his material. The Writers Guild of America also has a registration service to assist writers in establishing the identity and completion date of their work. The fee is nominal and the registration is valid for ten years and renewable. This registration protects both your script and the story inherent in the script if it is an original screenplay. Once this is done the writer can then note on his title page "Registered with WGA". Some sources contend that noting registration with the Guild is a sign of a paranoid beginner and that it is not necessary. It is up to the writer. At least having the registration noted shows that the writer is informed enough to provide protection for this work.

### Summary

As mentioned previously, this study is not meant to be a comprehensive guide to screenplay writing. It is meant to introduce the beginning writer to the basic techniques of scriptwriting for the screen. It is understood that the serious



writer will continuously be studying up on his craft to learn and grow. All sources investigated yielded valuable information. This was not too surprising since all writers have their own little tricks and methods they employ. The result of this collection of various sources allows for the beginning writer to grasp an overview of the screenplay writing process. The areas of script development and characterization and dialogue contain the bulk of the information. This is beneficial since it is in these areas that the beginning writer needs to develop competency in, in order to become a screenplay writer.

## CHAPTER III: SUMMARY

Introduction to the Summary

For the individual interested in working in the motion picture industry it is vital that he understand the difficulties that he will encounter. There is no guarantee of success. Hard work, determination, talent, and luck are needed. It is to the individual's best advantage to be adequately prepared before seeking employment in the highly competitive motion picture industry. For the person who dreams of directing feature films, he first needs to consider what does he have that will convince industry people to entrust a multi-million dollar film to him. Usually it is the promise of talent and that is not enough. One way of increasing chances on breaking in is to learn the craft of the scriptwriter. The whole purpose of this study is to investigate various sources of information regarding the fundamentals of screenplay writing to help the serious filmmaker learn a new aspect of film production that may prove to be a viable asset in seeking employment in the motion picture industry.

Summary

There is no definitive model for writing a screenplay that sells. What the findings in this investigation are meant to reveal are just the basic fundamental techniques for effective screenplay writing. It is up to the individual who is seriously interested in writing screenplays, to continue his search for

ways to improve and upgrade the quality of his writing. It is all too easy to just read about scriptwriting and dream about some future masterpiece. Ideally, the learning process should be continually ongoing. Reading, then writing, and reading some more to develop further techniques. There is no substitute for experience. The only way to learn how to effectively write screenplays is to start writing.

The six areas covered in this study: script development, research, characterization and dialogue, format, work methods, and marketing, are in no way to be considered a complete capsulization of the entire screenplay writing process. Script development allows for the beginner to comprehend the rough form of a script, from the story concept through the organization of the three-act design. It is this structure that the writer can adjust his story to; flexibility is the key. It is also where creative talent enters in. The writer cannot design the structure so tight that it cannot be changed. The paradigm is a model that allows the writer to lay out the screenplay in a linear design in order to see it as a whole. Research is so vital that it cannot be overemphasized. The writer must know what he is writing about in order to establish credibility with the audience. Good research is the sign of a professional. Characterization and dialogue is an area where good research pays off. A working class character needs to sound like a working class person. Using biographical sketches help to establish character identity and personality. The three ways

characters interact and the three P's are valuable tools for developing realistic characters. Developing good listening skills helps to acquire an ear for dialogue.

Format is essential when typing the screenplay. It shows a look of professionalism and indicates a knowledge on the writer's part, of the standard form used by all screenplay writers. Clean copy and sharp, crisp type will increase the odds of the screenplay being read. Motion picture producers are way too busy to even bother reading sloppy and incorrectly written scripts. Working methods can only be established by the writer personally. Other writers can offer suggestions and hints as to what helps them, and it would do the beginning writer good to read about these; but in the end only the writer will know what his best writing habits are. Marketing is an area that the beginning scriptwriter does not have to worry about until he has his screenplay polished and ready to send out, but at times when the writer is feeling down and discouraged, it will be enlightening to read about the final phase of the screenplay process. The writer can then begin anew with a fresh spirit and drive.

Writing screenplays for the theatrical feature is a highly competitive profession. The individual who attempts to enter this profession needs to be prepared to face hard and tough work, frustration, rejection, and the possibility of never becoming successful. Hard work and determination are the keys to success.

It is hoped that the findings of this study will act as a catalyst for the serious writer and will launch him onto the road of becoming a professional screenplay writer.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- "Dialogue on Film: Lawrence Kasdan." American Film. April, 1982, pp. 10-13, 28-31.
- Brady, John. The Craft of the Screenwriter. New York, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981.
- Root, Wells. Writing the Script. New York, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979.
- Goodman, Evelyn. Writing Television and Motion Picture Scripts That Sell. Chicago, Illinois: Contemporary Books, Inc., 1982.
- Field, Syd. Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting. New York, New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1982.
- Gaskill, Arthur L., and Englander, David A. How to Shoot a Movie Story. Dobbs Ferry, New York: Morgan and Morgan, Inc., 1960.
- "Dialogue on Film: Joan Tewkesbury." American Film. March, 1979, pp. 35-46.
- "Dialogue on Film: Thomas Rickman." American Film. July-August, 1981, pp. 57-61.
- "Dialogue on Film: Fay Kanin." American Film. March, 1980, pp. 57-64.
- "Dialogue on Film: Mario Puzo." American Film. May, 1979, pp. 33-44.
- Giustini, Rolando. The Filmscript: A Writer's Guide. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980.

APPENDICE I: IMPORTANT ADDRESSES

1. ASSISTANT DIRECTORS TRAINING PROGRAM  
8480 Beverly Blvd. Hollywood, CA. 90048  
(213) 653-2200 Ext. 227
2. WRITERS GUILD OF AMERICA WEST  
8955 Beverly Blvd. Los Angeles, CA. 90048  
(213) 550-1000
3. PACIFIC COAST STUDIO DIRECTORY  
6331 Hollywood Blvd. Hollywood, CA. 90028  
(213) 467-2920