
How to write a script

How to write a script.

The complete guide to the screenwriting process.

In this post, I'll show you the process of screenwriting, from start to finish with examples, tips, and some exercises.

How to write a script

1. How to start?
2. Prewrite.
3. World building – what is it and how to do it right.
4. Characters, conflict, and relationships.
5. Write – synopsis, treatment, dialogue.
6. Format
7. Rewrite
8. Submit

1. How to start?

Every movie or TV series begins with an **IDEA**. Whether it is an **original** idea or a book you want to **adapt** to the screen.

You have an idea. Maybe it's vague or general, and maybe you're not sure if it's any good – **but it's a beginning.**

Write your idea, on a piece of paper or on your laptop. It doesn't matter. No one will see it but you. Write it in quickly, whatever and however, it comes to mind. **No judging.** Get it out of your head, it doesn't need to be more than a few sentences. Write it down and move on to –

2. Pre-Write.

Do the Pre-write right and you will **save you time** and fill less frustrated. Therefore, you will have a better chance of not quitting and actually finishing your script. **That is how important this step is and that is why** I made you a special freebie – *“From idea to structure”*.

It's a 5-day mini-course, in which you'll learn how to:

- Identify and design your main character.

- Build the main conflict.
- Structure of the main story points.

It is a **simple and efficient process** to start a new project. It's a process I have successfully used and taught for many years.

[Get your freebie here.](#)

3. World Building



World building is especially important for films and TV series that take place in worlds that are different from ours (such as *Game of Thrones*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, etc.).

However, every film or series has a world that needs to be built.

World building is an **easy and fun process**, so take as much time as you want and have fun with it. Put

some real **thought and creativity** into designing your world, and I assure you, **your script will benefit from it.**

What is world building and how to do it?

Imagine the world in which you want your story to take place.

Picture it as vividly and with as many details as you can.

For example, what kind of **technology** is available in your world? Is it more advanced than our technology? How do people there **communicate** with each other? Phone? Letters? Crows? Telepathy?

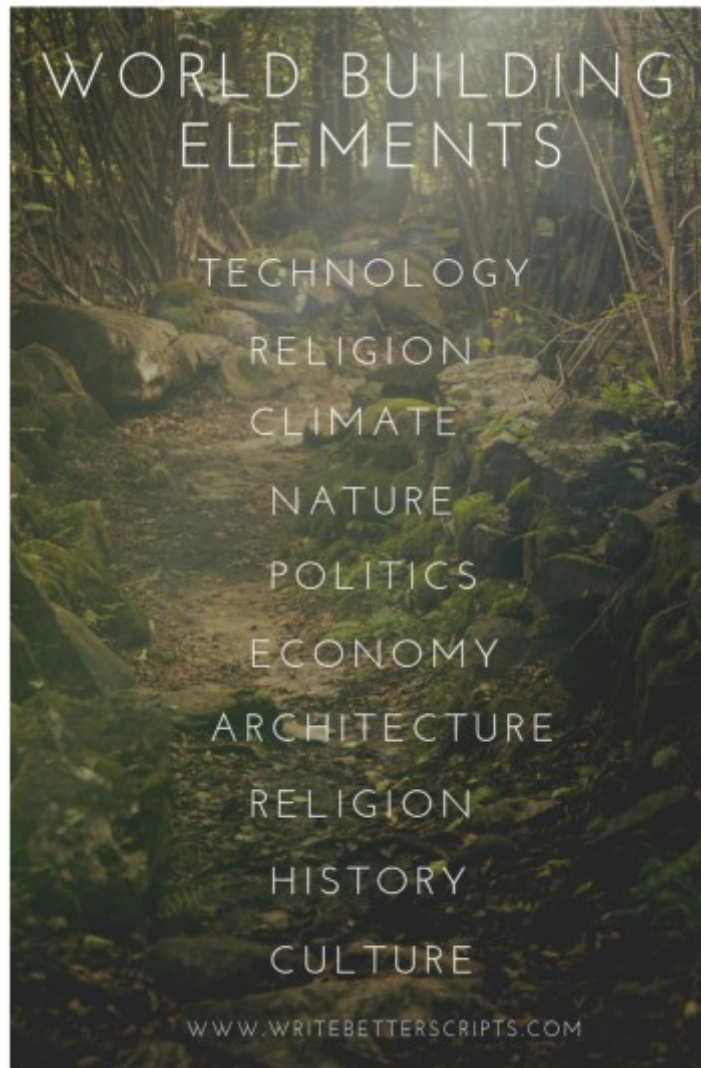
How are **nature and the climate** there? And how does that affect the **politics, economics, and architecture**?

Is it a **religious** place? If so, what religion? Is it a religion we know or a religion you created?

What is the **history** of the world? **Clothes? Food?** Anything you can think of...

Exercise

1. Write a paragraph or two about your world. Consider all these elements:



2. Think of your **hero in this world**. How does he behave? what does he know and what doesn't he **know**? What is his **past story**, what are his **wants and needs** and what are the **obstacles** that stand in his way?

World building is *not only* for fantasy or science fiction.

Think of **New York** in *Friends*, *Sex and the City*, *Girls* and *The Sopranos*. So different, right? The choices the show's creator made built the world that is the specific "New York" that was right for the story.

4. Characters, relationships, and conflict.

You got your world, and now you need characters to roam the world and get in trouble. In order to do that, you need to ask (and answer, in writing):

- Who is the main character?
- What does the character want?
- What prevents her from getting it?

The answers to these questions form a compass. They will guide you on how to build the plot and what obstacles to put in your character's way. Another benefit of answering these questions is you'll know what choices and decisions your character will make when facing a dilemma.

These answers will change more than once during the work on the script, and that's fine. It's more than fine; **it's the way it should be.**

Important note:

Even if you write a TV series or a movie that has **more than one main character** (which happens,

especially in TV), I suggest that at this stage of the process, you **focus on one character**.

After you've defined who the main character is and what she wants and why she has trouble getting it, repeat the process for the other characters as well. Or at least for another 3-4 character.

Now, add 2 more questions:

- What do they want from the main character?
- What does the main character want from them?

Answering these questions will give you the conflicts between the characters. **Conflict is drama**.

Once you have established your characters and their relationships the writing will be **easier** and the screenplay will be **better**. GUARANTEED.

5. Write!

Synopsis.

A Synopsis is the essence of the story, told in the order the audience will be watching it.

The synopsis should have all the significant plot points.

- **Beginning** – Everything from the moment the film/episode starts and up to the inciting incident.
- **Inciting incident** – An event that sets the story in motion. The inciting incident HAS to have a significant effect on the hero.
- **First turning point** – The hero starts the journey and deals with the new situation caused by the inciting incident.
- **Call to action** – The hero's goal gets more specific.
- **Point of no return** – At the midpoint of the story, the hero will have to risk everything.
- **All is lost** – Complications and great danger. The hero will have to rise to the occasion and find new inner strength.
- **Second turning point** – Change in direction. Stakes are higher. The hero has one last shot at redemption.
- **Climax** – The goal is met, the problem is resolved actively by the hero. The hero succeeds or fails in an irreversible way. (In a TV episode, that may not be the case).
- **The end** – The film/episode ends.

Remember:

A synopsis is a tool for you to make the work easier.

When you submit your script to producers, you will write a more “salesy” synopsis. Don’t worry about it now. When the script is done, writing the synopsis is easy.

Treatment

If a synopsis tells the essence of the story, the treatment will describe – shortly – **everything that will happen** in the film/episode.

I have written a [step-by-step free guide](#) on how to write a treatment. You can find it [here](#). I suggest you read it, do the exercise, and then come back...

Dialogue

Good dialogue, in my opinion, is a dialogue that sounds authentic for the world and the character.

Tips for writing good dialogue:

- Choose a uniqueness to each character. Be subtle.

- Say the dialogue aloud. Hear if it sounds natural. If it doesn't, change it.
- If you feel you've heard it before, take it out. [Check this list](#) of the most overused sentences in films. It's hilarious and a good wake-up call to all screenwriters.
- **DON'T** let the character say the **subtext** – the subtext is the true meaning of what we say. In real life, people usually do not say what they want to say directly.
- Most times, the first draft is full of subtext, and you can easily fix it in later drafts.

Example:

What is the **subtext** is [this beautiful scene](#) from "Good Will Hunting"?

It is Ben Affleck's character telling Matt Damon's character – I love you, I want what's best for you.

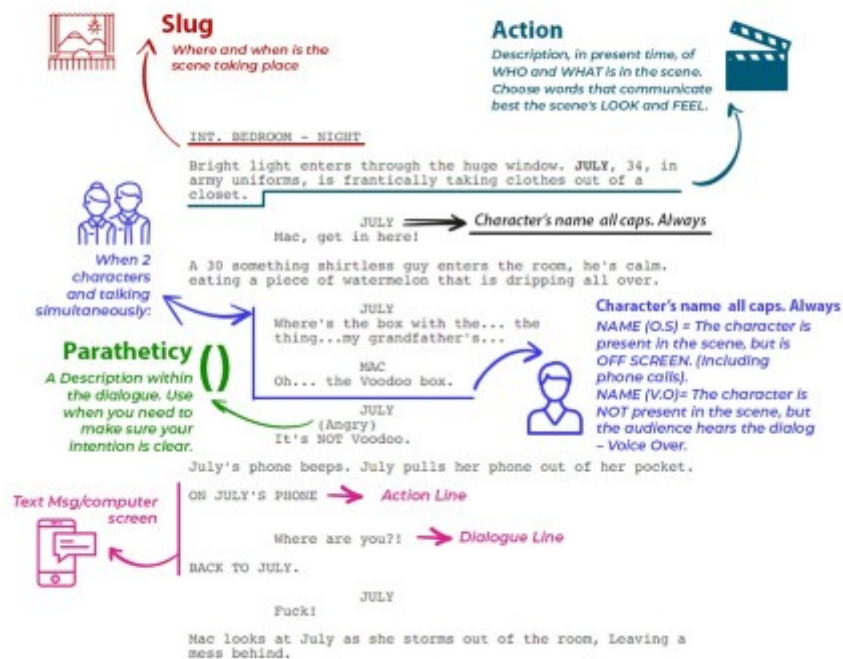
6. Format

You have to write in format, because –

1) These are industry requirements. No one will read a script that is not in format.

- 2) The format allows you to know, roughly, how long (in minutes) the script is.
- 3) Why not?

How to format a screenplay



If you do not want to invest money at this time in script software, there are free software for writing in a format, such as [Amazon story writer](#) or [Celtx](#).

You can also make a template in Word, though I don't recommend it. However, [here is a tutorial](#) on how to set your script template in word.

7. Rewrite

Screenwriters fall into two groups: those who think rewriting is the easy part, and those who hate to rewrite (ME!). Whether you like it or loathe it, you have to rewrite, and you have to rewrite well.

Here are some tips to effectively rewrite (without wanting to die):

1. Get notes from the right people

Screenwriting can get lonely. For days and days, it's just you and your laptop.

But you need someone you appreciate, who wants the best for you, to read your work and give you notes. However, we are screenwriters, and we are sensitive souls. It is not easy for us to receive feedback. **The wrong kind of feedback can get us stuck, or even cause us to give up entirely.**

That's why it is important to **get notes from people whose opinion we value, AND** with whom we have the kind of relationship that allows them to tell us their opinions, as good or as bad as they may be, and **we won't get hurt.**

2. Surround yourself with kind and supportive people

If you do not have this kind of person in your life yet, **look for one**. It usually means reading their scripts and giving them respectable, good and serious notes. It's worth it, both on a personal and a professional level.

[You can find a rewrite-buddy in our Facebook group.](#)

2. Understand what's behind the notes, and make corrections accordingly.

You don't have to accept all the notes. But try to understand what's behind them. Maybe something is not clear. Many times, something is so obvious to us that we do not describe it on paper. Or, maybe the character or conflict doesn't work. Use the notes you got to see the script with fresh eyes.

3. Let it marinate

After making corrections, don't read the script for a day or two. Things will look different (for better or for worse) when you read it after a short break.

4. Repeat, but not too much.

Sometimes, rewriting excessively kills the script. **But how much is too much? Unfortunately, I have no**

rule of thumb. Use intuition and consult with friends.

If you feel the original **spirit of the script is lost**, read **the first version**. Maybe you rewrote too much and you need to go back to older versions.

8. Preparing for submission

Whether you are submitting your script to a contest or a producer, add half a page telling why are you writing this script.

Producers know how hard screenwriting can be. They need any assurance they can get you'll finish the work. If you let them know why is this **specific script** important to you, they will know you will do anything to get it done.

Read this post about [how to write a killer logline](#). It is crucial.

In conclusion

The process of writing a script:

1. **You start with an idea.**
2. **Prewrite.**
3. **Build your world.**
4. **Set your characters, conflict, and relationships.**

5. **Write – synopsis, treatment, and then the script itself.**
6. **Write in format**
7. **Rewrite**
8. **Submit!**

A final note

Sometimes, it seems there is no chance that anything you write will ever be produced. **IGNORE THAT INNER VOICE.** All writers hear it. The professionals ignore it and write.

The one thing that makes a difference between professional screenwriters and amateurs is persistence.

It's easy to say; it's a little harder to do. But, it's **completely possible!**

If I, a mother of 2 from Israel, as far from L.A as it gets... have my work broadcast all over the world, you can too!

It helps to find a supportive community. You're welcome to join our [Facebook group](#) It is supportive and **free from cynicism or criticism.** You are welcome to ask anything there and get helpful and respectful answers.

Read before you Write

In order to write scripts, you have to read scripts. The more you read, the better you write.

And why is that? A script is a tool in which we convey the story we have in our mind to paper. This paper goes to actors, directors, and all the other departments that **work together to get your vision to the screen.**

When you read a script, you put yourself in the reader's shoes, and you'll intuitively learn to **write better scripts.**

Also, it is so much fun to read a script of a show or film you love.

Here are links for some GREAT scripts you can read for FREE:

[READ FILMS SCRIPTS.](#)

[READ TV SHOWS SCRIPTS.](#)

Exercise

Choose a script you like (You can use the links above).

- 1) **Read** the script once from start to finish; try to do it in one sitting.
- 2) Read the script again. This time, **identify the screenwriting terms**. Pay special attention to identifying the **hero and the conflict**.

[Grab your free screenwriting glossary cheat sheet](#)

Screenwriting terms

To be a professional, you must understand and master the **basic terms**. This is true for every profession and certainly for screenwriting—both for the writing itself and for being confident in meetings and with colleagues.

That's why I made [this FREE CRASH-COURSE](#).

Take it. I explain all the main terms + you can download a cheat sheet. And it will take you less than 20 minutes.



Screenwriting Glossary

Part of the problem comes from the fact that there are quite a few terms in scriptwriting that were coined in **ancient Greece**. For example, **Plato** coined the term “protagonist” in his book *Poetics*, and since then, there have been generations of playwrights, writers and screenwriters who felt badly for not knowing what it means.



It's time to clear the smoke over these terms that confuse us all.

Screenwriting is a form of **storytelling**, so let's start with storytelling basics.

Storytelling

Story

Everything that happened and happens to the character. The work of the screenwriter is to choose what, how and in what order the story will be told.

Plot

What we choose to tell, and in what order, to create a thematic meaning, both emotionally and dramatically. The writer chooses where to start, finish and what to show in the character's life. In other words, how to tell the story so it will be interesting. Sometimes, it means adding elements that are not part of the plot, in the sense that we could get them out and the story will still be understood. And that's fine, it's the writer's choice. These elements add style and tone, and they are important to the quality of the work even if don't advance the plot.

In conclusion, the story is the chronological order. The plot is how to tell the story.

Forster, the British writer who wrote *A Room with a View*, defined it:

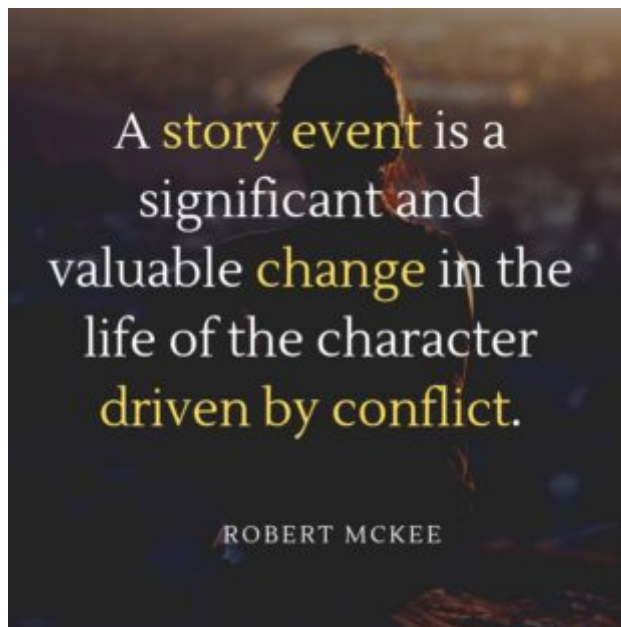
“The king died and then the queen died”

is a STORY.

**“The king died and then the queen died, from
sorrow”**

is a PLOT.

Story event



McKee explains:

“In other words, the **change** is not caused by chance but by the **conflict**, and it has value. A **Value** may be: good / Bad. Alive / dead. Love / Hate. Freedom / Imprisonment. True /False.”

In short, a **story event** is a change caused by **conflict** and has a clear value.

Screenwriting Terminology

Scene

A filmed or dramatizing piece that stands on its own.

A scene is a **part of a whole** fictional work.

Sequence

A sequence of scenes.

Usually refers to a few short scenes that together tell a larger part of the film, such as a chase, a robbery, a party, etc.

This is one of my favorite sequences, from Pixar's "UP".

Favorite Pixar's Up scene ever - Ellie and Carl's relationship thro...



Act

A sequence of scenes and sequences ending in a peak scene that causes a significant change (positive or negative).

Structure

This is a word I dreaded for years. It sounds so complex and sophisticated, as though it is from the engineering world describing something full of layers and small, moving parts. I felt this whole structure-thing was something I could never fully understand. But you know what? It turns out **“structure” is just the order of events that build the plot.**

Classic 3-act structure

The 3-act structure is the most common structure in films, plays, and novels.

In the 3-act structure, an active protagonist fights against external forces (the antagonist) over time, and the plot ends with an irreversible change.

Dialogue

A conversation between characters.

Monologue

“Speech presented by a single character.”

When a character is speaking but **not to** another character.

Character

Every person or creature that is present, doing or saying something.

Hero

A hero is a character who is influencing and being influenced by the events the most. For the most part, but not always, the hero is also the protagonist.

Motivation

Desires, needs, and beliefs that motivate a character. For example, in [Whiplash](#), Andrew's motivation is to be “one of the greatest” drummers ever.



Protagonist

The character who drives the plot.

There can be more than one protagonist. In fact, in a TV series, it is very common to have multiple protagonists.

Antagonist

A character whose desires are in conflict with the desires of the protagonist.

There are cases in which the antagonist is not a person but the elements of nature, society, etc.

Conflict

External or internal struggle resulting from opposing needs.

External conflict

The protagonist's desire is opposing the antagonist's desire.

Taken has a very clear external conflict: the protagonist wants his daughter back.



More external conflicts examples:

Indiana Jones is looking for the lost ark.

In **Fauda**, Doron has to find Abu-Ahmed.

Marty must launder \$500 million or a drug lord will kill him and his family in **The Ozarks**.

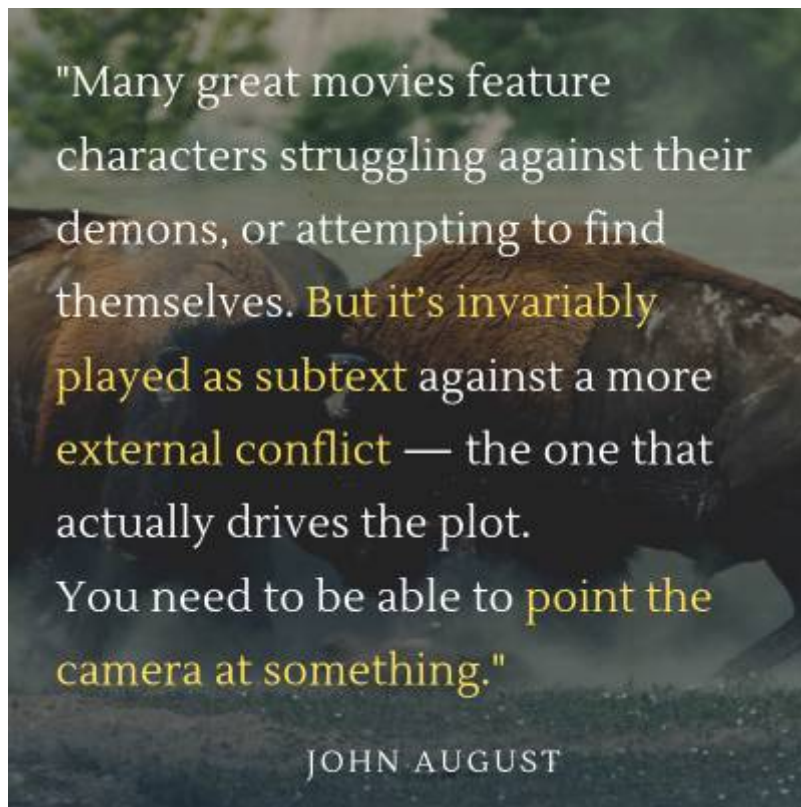
Ozark | Official Trailer [HD] | Netflix



Internal conflict

Internal desires that clash. Or, a conscious desire clashes with an unconscious desire.

However, I want to refer you to a quote from a screenwriter whom I am a total fan of, [John August](#):



Those are the key screenwriting terms. That wasn't so bad, right?

Download a [FREE](#) glossary cheat sheet with all these screenwriting terms.

I'm waiting to see your work on the screen.

If something is still unclear, please email me and I'll get back to you.

michal@writebetterscripts.com.

I always answer.

Michal

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