The Back Door to Hollywood

Action Guide 2

THE BACK DOOR TO HOLLYWOOD

ACTION GUIDE 2

TREATMENT, OUTLINE AND SCRIPT

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Sample Treatments and Scripts

The best way to learn how to write a really good treatment and script is to model award winning or blockbuster treatments and scripts. If you read enough of them, you will get the hang of it and discover why those scripts captured the reader's attention and were ultimately made into successful movies.

You can download sample treatments, movie scripts, television scripts, radio scripts, anime scripts, oscar scripts, treatments, plays and musicals at http://www.simplyscripts.com/.

You can also read online sample television scripts at http://www.imsdb.com/.

Structure and Plot Points

A typical full length feature film is composed of 3 Acts.

Act One = The Set-up

It introduces the main characters, the conflict and the inciting incident. It is the first quarter of the movie or 30 minutes in a 2 hour feature film.

Act Two = Confrontation

The conflict continues to build as the protagonist experiences increasingly more difficult obstacles to overcome until it reaches a crisis: the point of no return. The protagonist/hero is unable to resolve his problem because he does not yet have the skills or necessary awareness of his ability and what he or she is capable of doing to resolve their predicament. It is 1/2 the film and is 60 minutes in a 2 hour film.

Act Three = The Resolution

This is where the protagonist experiences the final conflict, climax and resolution. It is 1/4 of the film or 30 minutes long in a 2 hour movie.

Plot Points

Each Act is separated by a plot point, which is a reversal in fortune or an event that sends the plot in a new direction. It is a turning point in the film. The first plot point starts at the end of Act One where the protagnoist/hero takes on a problem. The next plot point is at the end of Act Two where the protagonist/hero reaches crisis mode. The Climax in the Third Act is another plot point because it involves the final conflict and resolution.

You may have additional plot points in your movie, especially if your story involves subplots. But a well-structured and executed movie will include these three major plot points and bring the

audience completely into the character's world to experience their dilemma, heart-ache and victory so they come out with a visceral movie experience (emotionally charged).

Read your One Page Synopsis from Action Guide 1 and write a short description of each act of your screenplay below

Act 1: The Set Up

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Identify Plot Point 1:

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Act 2: The Conflict

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Identify Plot Point 2:

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Act 3: The Resolution

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Identify Plot Point 3 (the Climax):

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Writing a Treatment

A treatment is a brief description of your story, which is longer and more detailed than your one page synopsis. It should be told in the present tense and describe events as they happen. Be brief, to the point and make it interesting to read, weaving together key elements of the plot.

There are two kinds of treatments. the first focuses on the key story elements and is between 2 to 5 pages, something for marketing and to give to potential investors and/or distributors to evaluate. The second treatment is a longer version incorporating key elements of each scene in the movie. Those can be up to 80 pages and are really for your own personal use to get organized.

For purposes of this course, you are going to write a treatment that is 2 to 5 pages, irrespective of the length of your film.

Elements of a Treatment

Your treatment should include the following elements:
1. Working title
2. Author's name and contact information
3. Copyright information
4. A short logline
5. Introduction to the key characters as you hi-light key events.
6. The who, what, why, when and where of story-telling.
   - Who is the screenplay about?
   - What do they want?
   - Why do they want it?
   - When is it taking place?
   - Where is it taking place?
7. One to three paragraphs setting up the story as you introduce the main characters and conflicts (Act 1)
8. Two to six paragraphs describing how the increasingly difficult obstacles and conflicts lead the protagonist to a crisis and point of no return (Act 2)
9. One to three paragraphs dramatizing the final conflict, climax and resolution (Act 3).

In the next 2 to 5 pages, expand your 3 Act Structure into a draft Treatment.

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Now re-write it so that it hooks the reader and is so engaging that the reader cannot put it down.

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The Step Outline

Now that you have your Treatment, it's time to focus on writing the step outline for your movie. The reason you want to write a step outline before jumping in to write your movie script is so that you avoid writing a stream of consciousness that meanders away from a tight story line that captivates your audience. If you just start writing without the step outline, even though you may find yourself in a creative flow, you are likely to write 50 or more pages that will have to be cut, consolidated or eliminated altogether.

So what exactly is a step outline? A step outline uses steps instead of scenes. Steps are simply story events and may consist of more than one scene. For example, in an action movie, one step of the outline may consist of your hero stealthily breaking out of a locked room while his captives play poker totally unaware of what is going on until one of them decides to check on their prisoner.   The step may consist of several scenes that constitute a sequence of events: the hero's actions in the locked room, the prison guard's playing cards in the next room, the hero's escape outside and one guard's realization that he is gone as he checks on the prisoner.

Each step in the outline should contain 1 to 2 short sentences describing each event. The trick is to focus on the key elements of the story. Use the step outline to get organized, adhering to the 3 Act Structure. Even if you are doing a short film, sizzle piece or short video, you still want to use a step outline. Get in the practice of writing with moving images in your mind. See the story unfolding in your imagination and then convey the ideas on paper.

Once you are finished, go back and re-read it. Circle the cliche scenes and rewrite them so they are new and improved. Cut out anything that is superfluous to the story and consolidate your ideas.

Keep in mind that nothing is set in stone. This is a creative process and you may find that when you actually sit down to write your screenplay, you may come up with other ideas or need to change things.

In the next few pages, do a step outline and identify where your Acts begin and end, hi-lighting the main plot points in the outline.

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Writing the Script

Once you have your step outline done, it should become much easier to write your movie script, whatever length it may be. To make your life easy, buy script writing software. The two most popular are Final Draft and Movie Magic Screenwriter. There are some free script writing programs as well which you can Google.

Screenwriting software comes with pre-programmed formats because script formats vary depending on what you are writing and who you are writing for (i.e.] movies, television sitcoms or television dramas, etc.). Certain television shows will have set formats that you have to follow. For purposes of this course, we will deal with the basics of screenwriting and a standard movie format.

When you write your script, you want to fully engage the reader so do not write long paragraphs or boring dialogue. This is your chance to hook them and book them. A good screenplay draws the reader into the world of the protagonist so that s/he begins to project the movie in their mind as they read the script. If they can picture it and are fully engaged in your story and dialog, you have a much better chance of making them a champion of your project.

When writing your script, include camera angles and shots only where necessary to convey an idea or an integral part of the story. Never litter your script with too many shots because it will distract the reader from the story. For example, when characters are speaking to each other, do not include shot, reverse shot unless absolutely necessary. Write the dialogue, descriptive action and character movements into the script so the reader becomes totally engrossed in the story line but do not put in so much that it leaves no room for the imagination. When it comes time to film, you will need to do a more detailed shooting script that has each shot.

The only way for you to write your script is to sit down and actually write it. Set aside at least a half hour to 2 hours a day to work on your script. The reason I recommend at least 2 hours at a time is that as you begin to write and engage yourself in the creative process of movie making, you are more likely to write a cohesive tight story if you write chunks of it at a time. Your mind will be focused and clear.

You may encounter down times and that's okay. Finishing a script takes work and dedication. But the moment it becomes drudgery, walk away and do something different. This is supposed to be fun. If you are passionate about your project, you will finish it, even if you have a creative block from time to time. I'll tell you a secret, creative blocks are actually building blocks so don't take it to heart if you get them. Everyone does. Sometimes you need to do something else so your mind can let go. The moment you release yourself from the burden of having to come up with something right away and move onto something else that is pressure free, you may be surprised how you will be flooded with great new ideas that you can weave into your script.

Formatting the Script

Let's go over the basics of formatting your script so you know how to write them and read them. Set forth below are the basic elements that are built into screenwriting software. Alway skip lines between elements. Scripts are usually written in Courier Draft and most professional script writing software will do this automatically. They should also include page breaks and continued indications where necessary so I will not go over that here.

Title Page:

Obviously your script needs a cover page - aka the title page. The title page contains the title of your movie in bold type centered on the page. Two lines below that and centered type "Written by". Two lines below that and centered type your name and any co-writers. In the lower left hand corner type your contact information, including address, telephone number, email address and website if you have one. In the lower right hand corner type your copyright information and where it is registered (i.e. US Copyright Office, WGA East or West).

Here is an example:

<div align="center">

"TITLE OF SCREEN PLAY"

Written by

Your Name

</div>

Name of Production Company
Street Address   U.S. Copyright © 2011
Phone number   Registered WGA East
Email Address
Website

First and Last Lines of Your Script:

The first line of your script should always be FADE IN in ALL CAPS and flushed left. This is what it looks like:

FADE IN:

The last lines of your script should be FAED OUT in ALL CAPS and right indented 1.0" and then THE END centered and in ALL CAPS. This is what it should look like:

FADE OUT.

                                        THE END.

Scene Heading or Slugline:

Each new scene appears on a single line called the slugline. It contains the location and time of day and almost always begins with INT. (interior) or EXT. (exterior) to convey if the scene is taking place inside or outside. Next is the name of the location: BEDROOM, LIVING ROOM, BUS STOP. Then it includes time of day - NIGHT, DAY, DUSK. All letters should be in ALL CAPS.

A slugline can also include production information such as CONTINUOUS ACTION or ESTABLISHING SHOT.

Here are some examples:

INT. COFFEE SHOP - DAY
EXT. FIREHOUSE - NIGHT
INT. WHITE HOUSE - DAY

If you have already introduced the scene heading location and you are putting in other shot and location sluglines and you want to return back to the coffee shop scene, you can simply use another slugline that says "BACK TO COFFEE SHOP".   You can also use INTERCUT BETWEEN two scene locations or rooms within one location so as not to break up the flow of your script and distract the reader from the story line.

Shot:

A shot is what the camera sees. It should be in ALL CAPS and focus the reader on an object or person.

Here are some examples:

CLOSE UP OF BOTTLE OF PILLS
ANGLE ON MONICA
MONICA'S POV
INSERT
WIDEN TO REVEAL
PAN TO

Action Element

Action or description sets the scene and describes the the setting. It is told in present time and allows you to introduce your characters. It starts at the left margin and runs to the right margin. Keep your paragraphs short so as not to bore the reader.

Here is an example of a scene heading with description and action:

INT. SPANISH RESTAURANT - EVENING

At an intimate candle-lit table for two, Paolo sits across from Maria, holding her hand in his. She surveys the noisy room, registering disappointment from the live music that is just a little too loud for their planned romantic evening.

Character Name

The first time you introduce a character, you must introduce the name of the character and it should be in ALL CAPS. The next time you use the characters name in description or action, it can be lower case. Always use ALL CAPS for the character in the dialogue element. A character's name can be their actual name such as BETH or a descriptive name or occupation such as POLICE OFFICER or SMALL CHILD.

Here is an example of use of dialogue after a shot:

ANGLE ON

A pleasantly plump, otherwise refined looking woman of fifty, in an elegant, flattering black dress, a glass of champagne in hand. This is STEPHIE GOODFRIEND. A WAITRESS with a tray of hors d'ouevres is just offering her some.

Dialogue

Dialogue is indented 2.5" from the left margin and between 2.0" to 2.5" from the right margin. Use the dialogue indent format when a character speaks to himself, to another character, voice over or off screen. Make it sound natural, conversational and match the way your particular character would speak. Craft your dialogue so that it is real and charged with emotions. Become a master of words and write great memorable dialogue.

Here is an example:

                    WOMAN
          I lost my train of thought. Where was I?

                ENLIGHTENED MASTER
          You were playing the blame game.

WOMAN
          Was I winning?

                     ENLIGHTENED MASTER
          No. Nobody ever wins the blame game.

Parenthetical

Parenttheticals are left indented 3.0” and right indented 3.5”. They are not centered. Parentheticals are used to give action direction and/or to convey an attitude. Parentheticals can be used in the middle of dialogue to convey action or feeling.

Here is an example.

                              BILLY
                         (dismissingly)
          That’s not funny ...
                         (turning away and grabbing
                         the water hose)
          but this is!

As he drenches her with the water, she screams while running frantically to keep out of the line of fire.

                              BILLY
                         (continuing)
          That ought to cool you off for
          awhile!

Extensions

Extensions are placed next to the Character’s Name above the Dialogue and include O.S. (Off Screen) and V.O. (Voice Over).

Here is an example:

                              MOTHER
                         (shouting upstairs)
          Dinner’s ready.

                           SON (O.S.)
          Coming.

Transition Element

They are left indented 6.5" and right indented 1.0" and in ALL CAPS. They precede Scene Headings.

Here are some examples:

CUT TO:
DISSOLVE TO:
FADE TO:

Titles and Opening Credits

Some scripts will include BEGIN TITLES, BEGIN OPENING TITLES or END TITLES but it is not necessary.

Here is an example:

EXT. CAFE - DAY

BEGIN TITLES

as the restaurant staff and waiters attend to the noisy lunch crowd and hoards of people waiting anxiously on line.

Subtitles and Superimposed Titles

You can also include SUPERIMPOSED OR SUBTITLES in ALL CAPS to include text or images on top of film footage where absolutely necessary. Subtitles are often used if the character is speaking in a different language or where the director believes that information is critical to the audience, such as a time or place.

Here is an example:

EXT. NEW YORK CITY STREET - NIGHT

Jan and Bob are walking arm in arm in a barely audible flirtatious banter.

SUPERIMPOSE: 2 Years Earlier

The First Draft is Not Your Final Draft

When you embark on your script writing endeavor, remember that you will be writing and re-writing your script over time so do not pressure yourself to get it perfect the first time around. The creative process is a process so let it unfold naturally. Have some fun with it and let your imagination carry you to new horizons.

Recommended Reading:

Syd Field's *Screenplay*
Syd Field's *The Screen Writer's Workbook*
Robert McKee's *Story*