disciple

A SCOTSMAN BECOMES A SIKH

The Award-Winning screenplay by

GURMEET MATTU

With Orange Prize for Screenwriting Report

Writing A Screenplay
By Gurmeet Mattu

Screenwriting appeals to many writers not only because it can be extremely lucrative but also because cinema is the most powerful entertainment medium of out time. This may at some time in the future be superseded by the internet or other digital media but whatever form may appear, the writer is always going to be required to create drama to entertain an audience.

This short guide is written for people with some experience of writing, but not in the screen trade. You should be comfortable with the concepts of the protagonist and antagonist, the conflict and complications, and classic three act structure.

This is the merest dip of the toes into the ocean of screenwriting. Because it is so lucrative it has spawned a veritable industry dedicated to teaching the craft, from screenwriting gurus to university courses, but the reality is that only so many scripts are bought and only so many films are made, so don't go in with high expectations. The other side of the coin is that producers and Hollywood moguls are not Gods, they frequently get it wrong. Otherwise there would be no movie flops or straight-to-DVD classics.

If you want to stretch yourself as a writer I would suggest that you at least attempt a screenplay, because the discipline is interesting in itself. You can submit it to various websites to get feedback and that's always worthwhile.

There are many other books and guides, written by screenwriting gurus, available on this craft and most of them are contradictory. Find them and read them, if only to get a flavour of why there seems to be so much conflict in the screenwriting world. (I once followed a heated debate about the number of brads a screenplay should be fastened with, on an internet forum, but that was just for the hell of it.)

There is more nonsense talked about screenwriting than any other art form, with so-called experts claiming that their 8 point plan is the only way to succeed, whereas some other masters demand that we follow their 95 element program.

This guide doesn't deal with such frippery, just the basics.

As a screenwriter it will be your task to create a sequence of images, shots and scenes that generate a particular emotional response in the audience. That's the job in a nutshell , but it's not easy and the screenwriter must master many disciplines to be successful.

Screenplays, even more than novels, need to be carefully planned and crafted to achieve the desired result. Screenwriting is therefore a process of writing and rewriting - sometimes for what seems like forever. Nothing is ever finalised until the camera rolls and only then is the writer's job done.

BEGINNING

The most important thing to remember when you set out to write a screenplay is that you are writing for a visual medium. You must therefore write only what the cameraman can film and the soundman can record. From the very first moment you should be thinking in terms of what can be seen. A character suffering from some deep angst must show his troubles through his actions or words, though good actors might be able to display this with a look, but you don't know who's going to be cast in your piece.

A screenplay is not a work of literature, but the plan from which other creative people will work and add their skills and creativity. Your screenplay will go through the hands of actors, a director, a producer, a cinematographer, a sound man, a set designer, a costume mistress, a props master and many more, and each will have something to say about what your film should be. Whatever ego you've built up in writing the screenplay may soon be dissolved, it's not going to be your baby anymore. And finally, when the movie's edited and ready, the marketing people get hold of it and sell your romantic comedy as a horror picture!

The mechanics of putting the screenplay on paper are easy enough to learn. They should consist of the following :-

SCENE HEADINGS

which show where the action takes place and at what time

INT. TONY'S BEDROOM**.** DAY.

or:

EXT. CITY STREET. NIGHT.

ACTION

short sentences describing what the camera is pointing at and what the actors should be doing in the frame (what the camera actually sees)

He opens the front door and, as he looks around, the silence tells him nobody is at home.

CHARACTER NAMES

tell the production manager the actors who need to be available for each scene and tell the director and actors what they need to do.

DIALOGUE

tells the actors the words they will need to learn and speak.

PARENTHETICALS

tell the actors how they should say their lines. These should only be used when they differ from the actors normal speech or if they have to emphasise something.

LIAM

(under his breath)

I don't care, I don't.

REACTION SHOTS

speak for themselves. Instruction to an actor as to how he should react to action or dialogue.

TRANSITIONS

words that tell the director when to cut from one scene to the next to move the story forward, though some directors and editors don't like to be told this.

THE PREMISE

The Premise is your screenplay in one or two sentences. Throughout the screenwriting process you will be expected to whittle your work down to treatments and synopses. The Premise is the shortest you will be expected to come up with and should capture the essence of what your story is about. The Premise should include the name of the hero, the setting and the conflict.

GENRES

Genres can be quite confusing because nowadays most writers tend to mix them up, so horror/comedy and fantasy/romance are quite common. Decide early which genre you are going to write in and stick to the genre's requirements. Film genres are commonly

Adventure

Comedy

Horror

Fantasy

Science Fiction

Romance

Western

War

Children's

and any mixture of the above.

CHARACTERS

As with all classically based drama the screenplay should have a protagonist (hero) and antagonist (villain) but these need not be as simply defined as goody and baddie. The important point is that all of your characters should be interesting to your audience.

THE PROTAGONIST – the person your story is about, the one who leads the action and who changes the most during the story.
THE ANTAGONIST – this is the person who will provide the main opposition to your lead character.
SECONDARY CHARACTERS – the protagonist and antagonist will both have friends and allies who will aid them, these can be family, friends, a dog or even a robot. The relationship between the leading characters and the secondary can often reveal a lot about them.

THE HERO

The hero's primary role within the drama is to provide somebody for the audience to empathise and identify with. If he fails in this task, the movie fails. He may have flaws, and these are expected, but in the end run he must be somebody we feel comfortable with.

THE VILLAIN

Need not be human at all. A typhoon, a shark or a deranged computer would all prove adequate adversaries if they were given enough human characteristics for the audience to identify with. Yes, even a force of nature can be relentless, which is seen as a human quality.

The traditional villain will wish to impose his will in some way upon the hero and thus create conflict, which is the basis of drama, but most important is the relationship between the hero and the villain. How has it come to this pass? Why? These are the questions the audience wants answered.

There is a need in all audiences to know more about the characters they are watching. It is an innate need and must be satisfied or the audience will be disappointed. A 'man of mystery' may well be that to the rest of the characters but we must know his alter ego, his needs and wants, his hopes and dreams. It is by pinning the audience's attention onto the hero and his dilemmas that we encourage them to take an interest in the drama.

A basic rule of thumb would be to rank your characters from lead (hero) downwards and affording them screen-time accordingly.

The lead character in a movie is usually the one who learns the most about himself within the film. This mirrors true life, where every individual looks for some hidden meaning in their life. It is essentially wish fulfilment with the viewer transferring their needs onto the hero.

Some screenwriters feel the need to describe their characters in great detail such as their age, sex, appearance, mannerisms, dress sense, their IQ, their likes and dislikes, how they see themselves and how others see them. To my mind this is material for the writer only and, apart from external, physical appearance, need not appear in the screenplay. What is vital is that there must be a gap in the hero's life which the screenplay will attempt to fill. As the writer you must know what this gap is and, even at an early stage, have an idea of how you're going to deal with it. The wise writer may make the hero unaware of this gap and part of the story being his discovery of his need. This gap or need can form the main plot of the piece, but is generally dealt with as a sub-plot, to be resolved at the conclusion, and thus leading to the denouement of the main plot.

MOTIVATION

At all points the writer must be aware of what drives each character. He must have a ready answer when asked at any point in the script, why does this character say or do this? It is not good enough to think that the character is only acting logically within his remit, you must know his motivation. By knowing this before you write it you create solidity in your story and character and this will invariably show in your script.

CONFLICT

All drama deals with conflict of one sort or another, even a love story. You may wonder how there can be conflict when two people love each other, but a love story does not make good drama unless there are problems to be overcome before this love can be fulfilled. The conflict in a love story could come from a disapproving parent, religious differences or physical distance between the lovers.

Primitive audiences would have been happy with resolving this simple conflict and getting on with drowning the village idiot, but modern audiences are a little more sophisticated and expect more from their entertainment.

To that end the writer adds Complication or Escalating Conflict. So, in our love story, not only does the maiden's mother disapprove of our swain, but then the old biddy goes and dies, leaving our maid in mourning and not in the mood for romance.

This is how the screenwriter works, by adding complication upon complication and constantly searching for solutions to these problems. This is why screenwriting really does demand pre-planning before the writing process begins, because otherwise you're going to add so much complication that you're going to write yourself into a corner.

There is also no rule which says that you must have only one conflict to deal with. An impending hurricane may threaten our lovers, and begs the question, which is the plot and which the sub-plot?

STRUCTURE

More than any other form of writing the screenplay demands structure. A three act structure basically means a beginning, a middle and an end. Your first act should set up your characters and their situation. You should set up your conflict as early as possible. In your second act your Hero makes efforts to resolve the Conflict, and may even believe he has succeeded, but ultimately the Complication thwarts him. In the third act our man finally resolves the Conflict and Complication.
Within this simplistic formula resides the basis of every screenplay.

Your art, as the writer, lies in using this formula to create interesting and compelling characters, a dynamic plot and sub-plot, gripping dialogue and stunning action. Sounds easy, doesn't it?

ACTION

Action doesn't just mean fights and chases, it means whatever physical acts a character has to carry out to achieve their ends. Describing action in a screenplay can be difficult for those unversed in the technique. For one thing, everything must be stated in the present tense. But the most important element that the writer must encompass that his description must be written as if he is the camera. He must see in his mind's eye, and detail on the page, whatever is important to the story.
So, he can pan, zoom and go for a close up to make his point, without intruding on the director's domain. Elaborate description is not required, it is the action which is important.

For someone switching from pure prose to screenwriting this may feel unnatural, but remember to see only what the camera sees and detail only that which is vital.

For all that film is seen in terms of the silver screen and blockbusters the writer must approach it with the lightest of brush strokes. Take time into account, the threading of a needle demands as many words as a huge explosion if they are to take up equal screentime.

SCENES

A screenplay is written in scenes and it is natural for the book writer to regard these as chapters. However, scenes, their content and length, have a much greater impact on the final product than the chapters of a book.

By this I mean that the screenwriter can set the tone and pace of his work by varying the length of his scenes, with shorter scenes speeding up the pace, especially if the most dramatic moments take place there. Reflective scenes with exposition can obviously be taken at leisure, but avoid being too wordy.

DIALOGUE

The new screenwriter always has problems with dialogue because working within a visual medium he is always instructed to 'show it, don't say it'. This means dialogue must be pared to the bone and everything, even emotion, must be displayed if at all possible. If a character can let the audience know his feelings with a wink rather than verbal exposition, then the wink wins.

Write your dialogue as normal, if you must, but be aware that you're going to have to go back and strip them back. This means that every word you use must be the right word and vital. Characters in a screenplay do not chat, everything must be driving the plot forward, revealing a character trait or making us laugh. But never write to let the audience know anything directly, there must be a reason for the exposition one character's dialogue gives to another.

Go through every piece of dialogue and ask yourself whether you can transmit the information visually rather than with words. A kiss rather than 'I love you'.

Always remember that dialogue eats up screen time much more than action.

Having said all that, it always surprises me that what audiences often remember from a film is a line of speech.

RECAP

Let's go back over a few things.

THE PREMISE

The Premise is the basic idea for your film written in one or two sentences. It should show what the genre is, who the lead character is, what they want, and what they are forced to do to try and get it.

THE SYNOPSIS

The Synopsis is essentially a premise expanded to three paragraphs for a feature (beginning, middle and end). The synopsis expands on what will happen to the lead character at each stage of the story and how they change by the end. Synopses should show the main reversals and twists and how these impact on the lead characters. They can also deal with the antagonist's motivation.

THE TREATMENT

With the Treatment producers, broadcasters and production companies often ask screenwriters to submit a 5-20 page treatment of their idea before reading or commissioning a screenplay. Treatments are incredibly tricky to

write because different readers make different demands. Some expect the treatment to read like a short story, while others expect it to be a mini screenplay.

THE OUTLINE

The Outline mixes a prose approach of the action, with limited dialogue where required. Consider it a map of how the screenplay will read.

THE SCREENPLAY

The screenplay is effectively the Outline with the action expanded in

greater detail to give an impression of the succession of shots, and with the dialogue and reaction shots added. This is finally your baby, even if it is only a first draft and will require many rewrites.

LAYOUT

Layout is not something that should bother you when you're writing your story. However, when you do sit down to write your screenplay, it is very important that it is written in the correct format.

For some reason filmmakers still live in the age of the typewriter and expect scripts to conform to some quaint standards. For instance you should always ensure that your finished output is formatted as Courier or Courier New at 12pts. They also expect standardised margins for each element of the script such as SCENE HEADINGS, CHARACTERS, ACTION, DIALOGUE and PARENTHETICALS. Details of these can be found online or you can even purchase software which will format your screenplay for you.

Many reasons are given for this need to remain in the Stone Age, but the main one is conformity. The experienced producer can look at a script, count the pages, and know how much time it will play on screen for. Excessive dialogue will also show up much more easily. Anything to avoid reading your masterwork.

And that's really all I can give you in this introduction to screenwriting. As I said there are many other books, blogs and forums on the subject. Read them if you get interested in the subject but treat them with

caution, there is more bullshit talked about film writing than any other form. If you find out why, let me know.

What follows is my screenplay DISCIPLE. It won Scottish Screen's First Draft Award but was never picked up by a production company. It was also entered for the Orange Screenwriting Prize (which it failed to win) and the review from that is also attached. But do note that this is not precisely the script which is critiqued. That unfortunately has been lost. I hope that working between the above, the script and the review you can make some sense of the process of screenwriting.

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