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Chapter 2: Start with the Script

Overview

The first step in the filmmaking process is developing the story. Good movies start with good ideas, which may be original or from source material. Theme, story, and character are the building blocks of a screenplay, which is written in a specific format and usually revised many times before going into production. This chapter takes students through the generation or adaptation of ideas; the creation, structuring, and formatting of a screenplay; and how that script is further developed to make it even better.

Consider these notes as you teach this chapter:

- Young filmmakers have lots of interesting ideas, but an idea is only the starting point: It must have at least one character, a conflict, and some kind of story. The story should be worth sharing with an audience and ultimately satisfying to them. Students need to think about the audience that will see their movie: Who are they, and what will they enjoy?

- A student might have an original idea or might want to adapt material that already exists — such as a play, a short story, a magazine article. For the class project, students need to come up with a story that has strong characters, has compelling visual elements, and can be told in a short period of time. An original idea would be preferable to an adaptation, which would require obtaining permission to use someone else's material.

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- Some effective ways to come up with original movie ideas include creating a mind map, writing down ideas for ten minutes, using a memorable personal experience, keeping a journal, and holding a brainstorming session with friends. In class, you might set aside time for students to brainstorm ideas in groups.

- A screenplay based on someone else's material is an adapted screenplay. Adaptation might seem easy, but it is actually a tricky process, especially for a new writer. This is because movies require a much more streamlined narrative structure than other forms and because it is difficult to acquire rights to someone else's work, or intellectual property as it is known in legal terms. Several examples of successful adaptations can be found in this chapter's Films to Watch: Additional Suggestions.

- Students should understand intellectual property issues. In these days of file sharing and the Internet, ownership of creative material is a concept that may be foreign to students. Some effective ways to discuss intellectual property and rights are to start with a basic, absurd (nonintellectual-property) example, such as, "I like your car. Why can't I just take it?" Why is stealing "hard" property any different from stealing intellectual property? Progress to the idea of borrowing. Starting with the concept of ownership is more personal than beginning with the concept of piracy is, as students who file share don't think they are stealing.

- Instructors can move on by citing specific intellectual piracy cases, such as the well-documented case of the film *Coming to America*. Once the concept of ownership is

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understood and the basics of source material, rights, and chain of title are reviewed, instructors might discuss tangential concepts such as fair use, satire, slander and libel, and life rights and then tie everything back to the discussion of original ideas, adaptation, and use of source materials. Students can also learn how to protect their own work by registering it with the U.S. Copyright Office or the Writers Guild of America.

- If students are considering doing a parody or satire of a movie or other existing work, then the school's policy on fair use needs to be clearly explained to them.

- The student's idea must be developed into a coherent, compelling story, and that requires an understanding of what actually makes a story. The "big" idea of a story is its theme. What is the script really about? Ultimately, what is it trying to say? It can be useful for an instructor to choose films and previously assigned books to discuss the definition of theme. Two strong examples are *Mystic River* and *The Great Gatsby*. The "story" of these films may seem obvious or simple — but the themes are quite complex.

- All great films start with a main character the audience can identify with and then present that character with a challenge or problem. Movies are "about someone who . . ." The protagonist does not have to be likable but does need to be relatable. To start the ideation and development process in class, it would be useful for students to write a log line for their story. A log line is a sentence that gives the reader a sense of the story. It tells who the story is about, sets up the "inciting incident" that triggers the story, and piques interest about what's going to happen next. The story's genre can often be inferred from

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the log line. In Hollywood, a well-crafted log line can make the difference between a project receiving encouragement (funding to start writing a screenplay) or a brusque "pass."

- Another important element of storytelling, visual or otherwise, is structure. There must be a beginning, a middle, and an end. In film, this is referred to as a three-act structure. In an effective story, conflict drives the action, the characters, and the story. Often students have ideas that are one-note. Something happens. An effective story is the result of several "somethings" happening so that there is a rhythm of action/complication. There is a protagonist with a goal, an antagonist blocking that goal, and a progression of action/small victory, action/complication scenes, as a string of successively higher-stakes events builds to a logical, if not obvious, conclusion. This structure closely follows the form of the hero's journey described by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which provided inspiration for *Star Wars* and countless other films. Even a five-minute student film can benefit from using a three-act structure.

- Tips to avoid writing a bad student film include not starting scenes in the middle of the action, avoiding music montages and dream sequences, keeping dialogue fresh, and not telling an overly conventional, or "slice of life," story or a story about making a movie.

- A screenplay should be written with specialized formatting software. Student pricing is available for Final Draft, and there are free programs like Celtx or Scripped. An example of screenplay format is found on pages 33–35.

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- Tips to get started writing include picking a title, deciding on a theme, writing a log line, proceeding to an outline, examining the structure, and reordering scenes if necessary.

- A script should be in as polished a form as possible before shooting. Even with a student film, developing a good script is the most essential element for ensuring a good movie.

- Students should develop their scripts through several revisions before shooting. A bad script never makes a good movie, and it's cheaper to rewrite a page than to reshoot a scene. A writer is often very close to his or her work and can't necessarily see the holes in it. To avoid making a faulty screenplay into an even faultier film, a filmmaker needs to solicit friends, advisors, and classmates to read his or her screenplay and give honest feedback on its weaknesses. Story notes include comments and suggestions that are intended to target areas that should be strengthened or rewritten. No matter the genre, the action and characters must be solidly grounded in the rules of their world. This means that the world, however based in fantasy, must feel real, even if it is a postapocalyptic planet. The plot must feel organic, and all details must be consistent and specific. The audience must understand that even if Batman can swoop and traverse Gotham, there are limits to his invulnerability. If there were no peril (conflict, obstacles), especially for a superhero, there would be nothing at stake and no dramatic tension, and the story would be dull. Writers can become defensive about notes, so the best way to give constructive notes to student writers may be to banish qualitative judgment language.

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- If you are writing or working on a project, even a class project, with anyone else, it's a good idea to have a written agreement. This can be as simple as an exchange of emails acknowledging the rights and responsibilities of each party. Even a student film on which no one is paid can be derailed by disagreements over who gets writing credit or who owns the finished work. The school may have a standard form for student filmmakers to sign before production begins.

- Studios have a formal development process, which begins with a legal process of optioning or buying rights to a script, pitch, or other intellectual property. The pitch is much like a verbal log line but with more detail; it is a ten- to twenty-minute abbreviated version of the story, told in present tense. The theory of using present tense is that the pitch has more energy if the story is told as if it were happening now, rather than as if it had already happened. Pitches last only a few minutes, but during those minutes, the listeners get a sense of the theme, the characters, the character's journey, and the stakes — what is at risk. Students may be reluctant to pitch, particularly if they are shy, but this is an essential in-class exercise. The job of the student is to create a pitch that engages the rest of the class. The job of the rest of the class is to try to articulate, in neutral language, why they would or would not be interested in seeing the movie being pitched and any questions or suggestions they have. Students should work and rework their pitches until it is clear (a) what type of movie it is; (b) whom the lead character is and why an audience would care about him or her; (c) what the obstacles are and what is at stake.

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- Studios also acquire projects through script submissions, but they will only look at scripts submitted through recognized agents or entertainment attorneys. The executive who reads a great script, or coverage of a script, or hears a great pitch from a known writer often in turn has to pitch the idea to upper management to obtain approval to acquire it. Studios may have up to two hundred projects in active development at one time. The development process involves an executive giving notes that request specific script revisions to the writer. These steps are often repeated several times before the project is given the green light for production — or put in turnaround.

Teaching from the Opener

The chapter opens with some history about Robert Towne and the origins of his acclaimed screenplay for *Chinatown*, discussing how Towne went through the process of addressing the theme he wanted to write about, outlining his scenes, and structuring the overall story. In class, you might discuss *Chinatown* or other plot-driven movies (detective movies are often good examples) that propel the story forward in ways that can surprise and entertain an audience while grappling with bigger ideas than simply "whodunit." You might ask students for suggestions of films that sucked them in with a story but that turned out to be more complex than they initially seemed.

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Teaching the Boxes

BUSINESS SMARTS: A WRITER'S CONTRACT, p. 38

This box offers a brief overview of points writers need to consider when they accept contracted work. You might present students with some hypothetical situations involving contracts, credits, and rights to illustrate how they should best protect themselves in those situations.

PRODUCER SMARTS: HOW TO WORK WITH THE WRITER, p. 41

This box explores a writer's work from a producer's point of view. As mentioned in the development section, it might be productive to have students critique each other's pitches from a producer's point of view so they can see both a writer's and producer's side of the process and how each might benefit from the input of the other.

Classroom Discussion Topics

1. Intellectual property law states that you can own the execution of an idea but that you can't own an idea. What does that mean? Discuss examples of films, television shows, or books where the themes are identical but the projects are completely different. Focus on specific aspects of the writing, the tone, and the setting.

2. Why is it so important that a filmmaker boil his or her idea down to a single sentence? Does that help the film address or prevent it from addressing complex issues and emotions?

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3. Discuss the concept of stakes — not just with regard to physical danger but also to emotional risk. How are the stakes raised in horror movies versus in romantic comedies?

Additional Assignments

1. Choose a film and analyze it. What is the theme? Who is the protagonist and who is the antagonist? What is the character's journey? Does the protagonist learn something or change? When? What is the "call to action" as described by Joseph Campbell? Is the hero willing or reluctant? What is the first obstacle? What are the conflicts? How are the stakes raised?

2. Do the principles of storytelling outlined in this chapter apply beyond film? How about for television shows or books? Choose a classic children's book — *Alice in Wonderland*, for example — and write about its storytelling structure.

3. Choose a contemporary fantasy, science fiction, or horror film and describe the "world" of the film and what the rules of that world are.

LaunchPad: How Do I Respond to Script Notes?

This chapter's How Do I . . . ? video, described on page 37, covers the process of receiving and responding to script notes. After students watch the video online, there are discussion questions they can submit: one about the content of the video and another about their own thoughts and experiences.

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Films to Watch

Films from the Chapter:

Black Swan (2012)

Captain Phillips (2013)

Chinatown (1974)

Crash (2004)

The Dark Knight Rises (2012)

Forrest Gump (1996)

The Kids Are All Right (2010)

Man of Steel (2013)

On the Road (2012)

Precious (2009)

Additional Suggestions

The Brothers McMullen (1995) and *Dear White People* (2014): These two films are debut features by young filmmakers, each of whom wrote and directed his own original screenplay. Watch both and discover how a personal experience can be crafted into a successful low-budget movie with strong characters and a resonant theme. *The Brothers McMullen*, made for about $25,000, won a Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival, while *Dear White People*, a satire about race relations at a university, was awarded a Special Jury Prize at Sundance.

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Mystic River (2003) and *Adaptation* (2002): The compelling drama *Mystic River* is a mostly faithful adaptation of the Dennis Lehane novel on which it is based. In contrast, *Adaptation* is a comedy about a screenwriter who is struggling to adapt a seemingly unadaptable book and becomes obsessed with its author.

The Great Gatsby (1974 and 2013): Watching both versions — one written by Francis Ford Coppola and very faithful to the novel, yet largely regarded as a failure and the other mounted by Baz Luhrmann — would be an instructive case of how different filmmakers might adapt the same material.

Clueless (1995) and *Easy A* (2010): Both of these smart, funny high school comedies are inspired by literary works that you probably read in high school. *Clueless* is loosely based on the novel *Emma* by Jane Austen, while *Easy A* is inspired by *The Scarlet Letter*, which the main character is reading in school. And since both books are in the public domain, the filmmakers were free to adapt the stories and characters without buying rights.

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