

How to write a good short film script

This is a short article in which to deal with a big subject: how to write a good script for a short film. Rule number one: there are no hard and fast rules. But, if your aim is to get your film funded, there are definitely some guiding principles that will help to ensure that your project is taken seriously.

Why Am I Making this Film?

No-one makes a living out of writing or directing short films. Most people see short films as a tool for learning and testing ideas, or a way of demonstrating that they have the talent to do something else. Generally that 'something else' is to make features. Whether you are working alone or as part of a team make sure that the project you are developing plays to your strengths and is achievable within your budget. Don't make an intense character study if you're scared of actors or develop an action story that will require stunts, car chases and special effects if you know you will only have £5K to make it.

What is a short film?

The most important thing to say is that a short isn't a feature film and that it is generally a bad idea to try to squeeze a story you are developing (or have written) as a feature into a short. Most festivals will accept as a short anything that is under 30 minutes, but many programmers and curators also say that they find it difficult to place longer short films (ones over 20 minutes). If your film is over 20 minutes long it may well need and be able to cope with more characters and a secondary story strand....

Finding the Story

Any kind of dramatic story requires 3 basic elements:

- A world
- A character
- A problem

Short films are no different; you just have less time to establish and develop each element. Most successful short films focus on ONE moment or event in the life of ONE main character. Because of that it is unusual for a short film to take place over a long period of time – it's usually just looking at the immediate build up to and/or consequences of that one event.

The World

Because of the need to establish an instantly recognisable world in order to get on with exploring a character's problem, it can be useful to set your film around a familiar event or ritual: a wedding, a birthday party, the first day at school, tea with stuffy relatives, Christmas Day etc. With a setting of this sort you can take for granted the audience's familiarity with the situation and you have immediately placed your characters into a story world full of barely suppressed emotions, which is always useful for generating dramatic tension and story events. The other advantage to choosing a setting of this sort is that it gives the story a finite time frame. Another popular setting for the short film is the journey. Most short films focus on a pivotal, significant event in the life of the main character so that the story inevitably takes the character on a metaphorical emotional journey and it can work well to use a literal journey as its setting.

The Character & the Problem

The most important questions to ask yourself when you begin to develop your story are:

- Who is the main character?
- What is his or her problem?
- How will the audience recognise the problem?
- Are the stakes high enough?
- Am I telling the story from the best point of view?

The audience must be clear from the outset who the film is about, and they won't be if you aren't. Your main character is the one who has the problem and if there isn't a character in the story with a problem then you don't have a film, or at least not one that will work as a dramatic narrative.

What is driving your main character through the story must be one of the following:

- A want
- A need
- An obligation

And in all cases it must be clear to the audience, even if it isn't to the character, what this is. But what must also be present in the story - and apparent to the audience - is something that is making it hard for the character to pursue his or her want, need or obligation. The fact that something is making it hard is what turns it into a problem and, like we said before, no problem, no film.

Making Problems Manifest to the Audience

The way in which you turn a character's inner problem into the heart of your film and make sure that the audience can SEE it is one of the most important ways that you can demonstrate your skill as a filmmaker and not just as a story-teller. When we're reading books we can be inside a character's head but when we're watching films we need to see characters DOING things that show us what they are thinking and feeling.

Are the Stakes High Enough?

Ensuring that there is something at stake in the story means that the audience can understand what the character stands to lose if he or she does not solve the problem. If the story hinges around a life or death situation then it is clear what is at stake but if it is simply that the car breaks down think about how you set the film up so that the audience knows why it really matters that the character completes this particular journey.

Am I Telling the Story from the Best Point of View?

Think about the story of Cinderella and imagine if you told it with one of the ugly sisters as the main character. You could still make a good story but it would not have a happy ending (in one of the earliest versions of the story the sisters have their eyes pecked out by blackbirds at the end!) and therefore would have a very different meaning – it would function more as a cautionary tale than as a feel-good fairy story.

What Does My Story Mean?

You probably don't set out to write a film with a theme or even with a conscious awareness of what your story means but every story communicates some meaning to the audience. Once you

are sure how the story begins and ends then you have a clear indication of its meaning and this will help you make important choices as you refine and develop your script particularly in relation to...

The Tone of the Film

Tone is intimately connected to genre and though genre is less of an issue in shorts than in features it is still important to think about what kind of film you are writing in broad terms.

To summarize so far...

A good short film needs a story in which something happens that has a discernible effect on the main character. All successful short films focus on one moment/event. That moment is likely to be:
one of universal significance-- a moment that is of significance to the protagonist (whether s/he knows it at the time)-- one that produces a situation in which the stakes are high for the protagonist.