

2. INSPIRATION



Extract

INSPIRATION

In this module, we will cover the following topics:

- Taking the Plunge
- Story Sources
- Rules of the Road
- Saleability
- Creativity and Motivation
- The Screenwriter's Nightmare

TAKING THE PLUNGE

According to the American inventor Thomas Alva Edison (1847-1931) “Genius is one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration”. Any professional writer will tell you inspiration is also 99 percent perspiration. Writing is hard. It is hard work for everyone who attempts it. If anyone tells you otherwise, they are either lying or not writing anything worth reading or seeing.

Each short story, novel, play or screenplay presents its own set of challenges. It starts with a spark of interest on the writer's part and it may go no further, or it could end up as an award-winning, internationally recognised film.

THE LONG HAUL

Most writing occurs over time rather than in a single moment of inspiration. Writing is a process, an action rather than an act. Inspiration may be the spark that lights the fire, but maintaining the fire requires a continuous supply of fuel.

The writer's dedication to their project and willingness to sit at the desk on a daily basis provides the necessary energy to keep the fire burning until the final flame goes out.

Most writers kid themselves by thinking they have so much to write they do not know where to start. That indecision serves many purposes, mostly delaying the start, which in turn delays the commitment to a specific project.

Or by working on many projects at once, they never have to finish any of them.

Lastly – and definitely the least common – is not having anything to say. By definition, that person is a reader, a talker but not a writer. As writers, we all have something to say, it is simply a matter of deciding what the most pressing subject is and what form it should take.

QUALITIES OF THE SCREENPLAY

There are some subjects that lend themselves to novels or short stories, others to essays or articles, others to stage plays, but in order to be the basis for a screenplay or teleplay there needs to be a good story and it must be visual.

Novels tend to be about one character and their view of the world. Most of the action occurs inside the main character's head. We learn a lot about that character's memories, ambitions, opinions, dreams, feelings and words. If other characters are involved, we learn a lot of internal information about them as well. Very little of this data can be expressed visually and yet it is essential to our appreciation of the book.

In a play, the action occurs onstage and the audience simply eavesdrops on the lives of the players as they talk. The action is spoken in the words of the dialogue. People go to the theatre to hear a play; they go to the cinema to watch a movie. The story line unfolds in images. In fact, some filmmakers argue the perfect screenplay does not contain a word of dialogue; rather it allows the images to dramatise the storyline.

In order to be successful, the story must be told in a way that touches the audience. The humanity on the screen must reach the audience in order

for them to relate to the action portrayed before them. If what's happening is too bizarre and/or unbelievable, the film does not work.

People go to movies to escape, to be moved, to be entertained. The audience seeks an experience different from, and greater than, the ordinary experiences in their lives, but they must be able to relate to the characters or the film will lose them.

THE BIG IDEA

So, you have an idea for a film. Is your idea about a person or persons, in a place or places, doing their thing? Can you express your idea in a simple sentence or two, also known as a pitch? If you can, you have made a good start on writing your screenplay.

Sometimes you need to write the story on several pages and then reduce the information to a few sentences. Either way, if an idea is too complex to express in a few simple sentences, it is probably too complex to become a successful film. There is no sure fire test to determine whether your idea qualifies until you actually execute it in screenplay form.

According to Syd Field, in his book, *Screenplay*: "A screenplay is a story told with pictures, in dialogue and description, and placed within the context of dramatic structure."

Always remember that all screenplays are read before they are seen, so start telling your story as visually as possible. Once you have written your screenplay only time will tell if your inspiration created a bonfire or a brushfire.

THE BLUEPRINT

Screenplays follow basic dramatic principles: they have a beginning, middle and end (though not necessarily in that order). The story upon which your screenplay is based must contain those elements.

The structure of the screenplay follows the same three acts established in classical theatre. The point of attack or set up, then the confrontation,

which is followed by the resolution. This is the straightforward blueprint for a successful screenplay.

When asked what your story is about, think about only two things: action and character. Every film is about what happens to your characters. Who they are and what they want or need drive the film. What they are willing to do, to overcome, or battle creates the conflict and from conflict comes the action.

A writing professor stated there are only three plots:

1. Man against man
2. Man against nature
3. Man against himself

All stories spring from one of those situations. Considering the numbers of stories out there, the variations are endless.

Think of some films or books you have experienced recently and sort them into one of the above three categories. It does not matter how often your story has been told before, it is up to you to retell it with a fresher approach.

EXERCISE 2.1

Pick a possible subject for a screenplay and then write it out in terms of character and action. Take as many words as you need, then reduce it to a line or two. Does it fall naturally into three acts?

For instance, a couple that are high on drugs rob a bank for funds to support their habit and are caught and punished.

An illiterate, beautiful young woman enters a beauty contest, she wins, then what?

Carrying a gun, a woman walks in on her husband in bed with another woman. She shoots one or both of them. She gets away with the crime or does she?

STORY SOURCES

If the idea for your screenplay is only vague at this time, there are plenty of places to go for inspiration. And the good news they are all around you. All it takes is a little observation and the ability to ask “What if?”

THE MEDIA

The best source for stories is the feature sections of your daily paper or magazines or even talk shows. Some of the items from these sources are so bizarre it's often said you could not make them up. Some are actually too bizarre to be believable if the audience thinks you did make them up.

Do not worry about getting the ‘rights’ to the story. As by the time your version finds its way to the screen, so many changes will probably have been made that the original story will be unrecognisable.

There is something called the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ that occurs in the privacy of a movie theatre. When the audience’s attention is riveted on the large screen in front of them and the dramatist has built a convincing, credible case or context for their story, they can take ‘dramatic licence’ and get away with preposterous situations, coincidences and events. Sometimes, but not always.

Newspapers or magazine articles have inspired many films (*Dog Day Afternoon*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* to name some classics). Others can come from a story a friend tells you. In any case, if you are motivated to ask “what happened next?” other people will be, too.

If a specific story catches your fancy, interview the writer of the story to learn more about it. The more you know, the more you can communicate. If the people profiled in the article are famous, you will need their permission to portray them on film. There may also be legal issues, which you may need to take advice on, particularly if you wish to explore the more salacious or scandalous events in a person’s life.

There are laws about public domain public figures, which differ from country to country, so it might be better to write your story using a character that happens to be the President, or the Mayor, or the Movie Star.

In general, the action and characters from articles can be used as a starting point and then be fictionalised to create a frame for telling your own story. Many writers start with the reported situation and rewrite the middle or the end following their imagination rather than the reported events. Yes, it is true you can make everything come out all right in the end, regardless of the 'true' story. It is a wonderful position to be in, isn't it?

While on the subject of using the media to draw inspiration, do not dismiss the pictures you see around you. Look for pictures with people in them, whether they are still or moving.

Many pictorial essays tell very moving stories through a succession of photographs with little or no narration. The story is told in still pictures, but perhaps it will be equally effective in moving pictures. If that is the case, try writing it in screenplay form.

Many of the televised reality shows are fodder for the longer form in film. The 'real' people interviewed come from all walks of life with problems, situations peculiar to themselves, but common to humanity.

If the situation is so unique, unless you intend to fictionalise it, you will need their permission to reproduce it in your film.

DOCUMENTARIES

Fact-based films are rich sources for fictional accounts of true events. Many documentaries are based on historical facts, which are in the public domain anyway. There have been countless accounts of the reign of Elizabeth I in England for example, or the life of Martin Luther King.

Many documentaries deal with present day events, situations or circumstances. Screenwriters often draw inspiration from such events, using them as the backdrop while a cast of fictional characters deal with the scenario.

By viewing good documentaries, you will learn the power of the image in telling a story without unnecessary dialogue.

AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

You are your memory: all the events, actions, feelings, hopes, dreams, successes and mistakes make up the person you are today. Your experiences up to, and including, this moment are fodder for your inspiration. These are the raw materials that fuel the fire of creative expression.

Take a step backwards to your first memory. Re-experience it sensually: Where were you? What were you doing? What were the sights, sounds, smells of the situation? How do you feel? Come forward through time and re-experience the vivid events of your life until now.

Certain things that are important to you will re-create the feelings they did during the initial experience. If they elicit emotions from you, they will from an audience. Writing about the most painful memories can provide catharsis, as well as valuable guidance for others experiencing the same thing. Whether these events will make a good film depends on many factors, but they are a good start.

Most of us have all the stories we could ever create right in our own family history. But be careful because there are risks involved in such personal stories.

According to those in the know of the literary world, Pat Conroy put his sister in his autobiographical novel, *The Prince of Tides*. After reading his book, she never spoke to him again.

Sometimes you are aware of a family secret but do not know the specific details. If the family members are still alive, you might interview them for more information. They may be reluctant to share the 'dirty details' if they think you're going to publicly embarrass them on the screen.

Be prepared to overcome their reluctance with the promise of fictionalising the events or hiding the true identities by changing gender, size, time period etc.

FABLES AND FAIRY TALES

From the Brothers Grimm, Aesop and Hans Christian Andersen come some of the best stories ever told. Many filmmakers are aware of this and

have used the actual fairy tale in their movies. Others simply lift the plots and then modernise them for today's audiences.

Fairy Tales have character and action, which transcend the time and place of the story. The myth of the wicked stepmother (*Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, etc) is embedded in our culture, but what if the stepmother in your story was a heroine instead?

Does the story still work, or will the children have to be wicked in order to keep the story moving?

The princess awaiting her prince is an ongoing theme in almost all the romances on the screen today but what if her prince turns out to be a toad?

EXERCISE 2.2

Pick several fairy tales and break them down into three acts in terms of character and action.

For example, Cinderella: Mistreated stepchild meets her prince, loses him, then finds him again to marry him and live happily ever after.

REMINDER

Have you completed the following exercises?

- Exercise 2.1
- Exercise 2.2
- Exercise 2.3
- Exercise 2.4
- Exercise 2.5

Tick each box when you have completed the exercises. Then you can move on to the assignment that follows.

SUMMARY

1. You are aware that story sources are all around you.
2. You are familiar with the main sources of inspiration for a screenwriter such as the media, family history and fairy tales etc.
3. You know the importance of keeping an open mind while researching your screenplay.
4. You understand the main points that will add to the saleability of your script such as the hook and casting.
5. You realise that screenwriting is a combination of both creativity and motivation and you know the importance of both.
6. You understand that writer's block could be a problem for you, but you have strategies with which to deal with it.

ASSIGNMENT 2

Write a story pitch, one or two lines describing your screenplay. In a 300-500 word essay, discuss the resources you'll use to supply the information you need to complete your screenplay.

Those resources could be your family history, a newspaper article, rock and roll music, a favourite chair, or a walk in the woods.

Explain how your inspiration works for you to motivate you to start your screenplay and what elements inspire you to finish it.

When you have completed this assignment, send it to your tutor for marking. If you email your assignment, make sure you include your name and assignment number at the top of your work.

If you send the assignment by post, attach the cover sheet, which is on the following page.

Well, that's the end of the extract. If you want to know more, you'll have to register!

We look forward to welcoming you on to the course, and helping you become a professional screenwriter.