Section 2: Analysing Scripts: A visual guide

Introduction

Writing a script is not like writing a story. This, fundamentally, is because scripts have a very specific layout and format that must be observed. A script also has a very specific writing style that is very different to anything that a student will have written before. As well as this, scripts also have certain expectations that they are largely descriptive and are designed to be a visual guide to the story. Therefore, it's important to ensure that before writing a script, the student has a very clear and solid grasp of their story idea and characters so that they can describe this idea in a visual manner.
In this section we'll examine what a script should look like, how it must function and look at examples of published scripts to ensure that students are producing not only an interesting story, but a script that is recognisable, understandable and engaging at the same time.

Method of creation

A key consideration for the creation of a script is whether to use a bespoke program, app or website. In doing so, the layout and format will often be 'pre-programmed' into the software and therefore less effort needs to be dedicated in creating an industry-standard-layout for the script. However, word processors and text editors can also be just as useful and in some cases the preferable option.

Regardless of the creation method, it is important nonetheless to understand how a script looks and how it functions in order to truly produce a script that engages, understands how to tell a story visually and that suits industry standards.

Layout and format

An example script, from ATTACK THE BLOCK, is attached in Section 2, Resource 1 to aid in this section.

It cannot be understated just how much scripts are blueprints for something, in this case a film production, rather than a traditional piece of 'literature'. A key discipline for screenplay writing is how to show it on a screen; aim to write the pictures, sounds, and speeches, and leave the rest for the filmmakers. Scripts, much like poetry, are written to be performed and in the case of scripts are the first stage in the process of production. Therefore, the closer that a script looks like a genuine product, with the correct format and layout, the more effective and potentially impressive it will be.

At GCSE and A-Level, writing a script is a relatively straight-forward production choice compared to making a film. This is essentially due to the requirement of resources; all that is required is a word processor, whether that be used on a laptop, desktop or tablet. Similarly, this can be produced using free software without even installing on a machine, such as Google Docs. However, this should not be an indication that writing a good script is any easier than creating a short film.

Using the checklist below may help in producing a script that is visually suitable, but it is highly recommended that students, at the very least, consider the attached visual guide, but

also look at existing published scripts in order to get a solid grasp of how these key points combine to create a recognisable script.

Scripts are traditionally typed or written on a word processor. The page will be a white, A4 piece of paper. The front, cover page, is traditionally quite sparse, save for the title of the film, written in capital letters, with the scriptwriters name below. All of this will not be in caps. On the next page, technically page two at this point, a page number appears in the upper right hand corner, usually formatted so that it sits in the header. (No page number is printed on the first page.) The font used is Courier and the size will be 12. The top and bottom margins are usually between .5" and 1". The left margin will be between 1.2" and 1.6". The right margin is between .5" and 1" in size. On average, one page of a script = 1 minute of screen time.

The generally accepted rule is that there are 8 key elements of a script:

- **Scene Heading (Also known as a Slugline)**
  The Scene Heading or Slugline tells the reader where the scene takes place. There are two main choices to begin with, are we indoors or outdoors? If it's indoors the Scene Heading should begin with (INT.) if outdoors write (EXT.) Then, name the location: for example, BEDROOM, LIVING ROOM, at SCHOOL, near a FIELD. Finally, if relevant, include the time of day - NIGHT, DAY, DUSK, DAWN. The Scene Heading should be a simple and direct way of setting a scene.
- **Action**
  The Action sets the scene, describes the setting, and allows you to introduce your characters and set the stage for your story. Ensure that you write in the present tense. Some exceptions may be made in some instances, but even scenes like flashbacks need to be written in the present tense. Also make sure that you write in the active voice (a door slammed shut) and not the passive voice (a door is slammed shut).
- **Character Name**
  Character names should be formatted in uppercase letters (all caps). The first time that a character is introduced give their age, if relevant, directly afterwards. A character's name can also be a description (ANGRY MAN) or an occupation (TEACHER). Sometimes, you might have DETECTIVE #1 and then DETECTIVE #2 speaking if they are not important characters. If the name is given to indicate that the character is about to say something, type their name on a new line, ensure that it is centralised and type the dialogue underneath, now aligned on the left of the page.
- **Dialogue**
  DIALOGUE is a generic term name given for when anyone on screen speaks. Technically, a "dialogue" should involve two people talking whereas "monologue" is the term for one person talking. For the purposes of this guide, dialogue will refer to a conversation between characters, when a character talks out loud to him/herself and also when a character is off-screen and only a voice is heard. This should not be confused with a voice over.
- **Parenthetical**
  Meaning, to include in brackets, a Parenthetical remark is used to provide more information about *how* a character says or does something. Generally they are adverbs and they can be an attitude, verbal direction or action direction for the actor who is speaking the part. These must be short, to the point, descriptive, and *only used if there is no other way to make this point.*
- **Extensions**
  Extensions are notes placed to the right of the Character name. They are included in parenthesis. They denote how the character's voice will be heard by the audience. An Off-Screen voice can be heard from a character out of the camera range, or from another room altogether. This can be shown on the script as O.S (off screen) or O.C (off camera). The other common extension is the use of a voice over. This is shown

on a script as V.O. The V.O is the narrator, can reflect on something and/or describe something.

Section 2, Resource 2 is a copy of some pages from JUNO (2007).
There are two main tasks for this resource: the second page features a page from the screenplay that has one example of each element labelled. Finish this by labelling *all* the examples of each element. Secondly, there is a second page which has none of the key elements labelled. Use the space around the outside of the script to label as many of the key elements as you can. As well as the 8 key elements of a screenplay, you may well come across two others, a transition and/or shot description. Both of these elements are not generally used in scripts in modern day filmmaking. Decisions around editing and framing are the preserve of the Director and their creative team who may decide to differ from your own ideas. For that reason, it's generally advised to not include either and instead focus on the actions and the dialogue to ensure that a vivid picture is created through your script. However, as a script is a visual medium and exists as a blueprint for a Director, including transitions and/or elements of framing can be a useful and interesting way of making clear how you, as the scriptwriter envisages the action onscreen unfolding. Similarly, sometimes an audience reaction or the overall tone of a film can be established through some technical aspects and for that reason sometimes listing the transition and/or framing used can be a powerful way of communicating something important.

- **Transition**
  As with character names, transitions are also presented in uppercase letters. They should almost always follow an Action but precede Scene Headings. Key transitions include, CUT TO; DISSOLVE TO; SMASH CUT; QUICK CUT; FADE IN and FADE OUT. These should only be used when absolutely necessary and it is advisable to spend a good deal of time analysing the use of these transitions to explore exactly what effect they have, why someone may choose to use a specific transition and be aware of specific examples of each. CUT TO is generally the most common as it's a way to efficiently show that something has changed in some way and that the location or time has significantly changed.

- **Shot**
  Shots are formatted like Scene Headings. They should be presented in all uppercase but should be next to the left margin. There should also be a blank line before and after the Shot name.
  When used, a Shot can help to inform the reader about a change of importance or focus at a particular point or stage. If a POV is used, refer to who the POV belongs. If a movement is used, be sure to include the general direction. As with a transition, these should be used as last resort and even then sparingly.

Section 2, Resource 3 is another page from JUNO. The task here is to read the page and, imagining that you were editing the screenplay as a director, consider where you would include a note about transitions and shots. Using the page, label and describe what transition/s and what shot/s you'd include.

Section 2, Resource 4 is an activity which is designed to develop the ability to create a screenplay. There are two tasks; the first requires viewing of DON'T KNOCK TWICE (2016) from 03:08 to 05:11 and to pay attention to the narrative and how character is developed; focus on dialogue and action. Secondly, list the action and dialogue. Some pointers have been added below to help and remind of what is required but has been added in a way that allows you to write over it.

Some final tips:

- Do not end a page on a Scene heading.
- Never start a page with a Transition.
- If the ending Dialogue or Action need to continue onto the next page, use the word CONTINUED or MORE. This can be added as a centrally aligned Parenthetical or aligned to the far right, both would include a line break above it.
- Do not end a page with a Character Name line; the general rule is to use at least two lines of Dialogue on a page, otherwise, start on a new page.
- Never end a page at a Parenthetical, unless it's to indicate that MORE follows or that the current Action or Dialogue is CONTINUED.
- Embrace blank space: a script should have a LOT of white page on it. With very specific places for each element and many line breaks used, a script will have a lot of blank space on it. A good visual indication that a script follows the correct format is very simple: it has a lot of empty white space.
- Remember, you should only describe the things we can actually SEE or HEAR onscreen.
- Use plenty of verbs and adverbs. This helps the reader to "see" the scene in their heads and do so in very little time and page space.
- Don't worry about sentences which would be considered incomplete, or grammatically incorrect. This is generally encouraged in script writing because writing in this style can make a description vivid and clear.
- Finally, aim to use an interesting verb rather than a standard one. For a simple example, it's much more interesting to read, "The script slides across the table" than "the script is passed across the table".

Action (Directions)

What is key in scriptwriting and specifically for Directions, is to only write what the audience can SEE or HEAR – and nothing more.

This is where your normal prose writing differs most from what I'm suggesting you do when writing a screenplay. Remember, you're not writing a novel – this is a screenplay. If you write wonderful prose, the audience won't ever know it. You're wasting the reader's time on things that either won't end up on screen anyway, or illustrate to them that you don't know how to properly write in screenplay format.

Fundamental to writing a screenplay is finding ways to convey character's feelings, emotions, and layers through their actions – what they literally do on screen.

For example, this kind of action is to be avoided.

She's hurting inside, and we can see it. She's a fighter though, so finding her inner composure, she puts the photograph back into the box she reluctantly took it from.

This is not an example of good scriptwriting because it needs to:

1: Have the character DO something. Movies are about the external, novels are about the internal. This needs the character to externally express something.

2: It's boring! The pace is slow and the character does very little.

An example of how this could have read:

She angrily wipes away a tear before ripping the photo up and throwing it to the floor.

This is more visually interesting and tells us much more about her internal feelings. In a written story you would have the time and ability to convey theme, characterization, plot, etc. but in a screenplay you can only convey these things in the actions of your characters and how your character does them.

Resource 4 presents a range of character emotions and situations. The task is to take the different explanations and make them more visual and more interesting, communicating how the character feels via their external actions.

Creating and developing character descriptions

There is more on creating naturalistic dialogue that helps to create authentic sounding characters in section 4, but this will provide you with some key ideas as to how, and why you should, create naturalistic characters.

Characters are the beating heart of every great story and in this case, every great script. If nothing else, your script has to ensure that it is written in a way that creates characters that your audience wants to spend time with. You should aim for your audience to empathise with your character otherwise your audience will be disengaged with the character and their 'journey' and as a result, have no interest in your story. There are many ways to create an interesting character and hopefully the resources here will help with this, but there are some key things that unite almost all great characters. Aim to do these things and your characters will leap off the page and grip your intended audience.

Firstly, truly great characters need to be active and not passive. This means that they are always on some kind of journey. This doesn't have to be physically from place to place, it can be an emotional, psychological journey but they should always be trying to get somewhere, achieve something, accomplish something difficult, overcome problems and generally improve or develop as a person in some way.

Secondly, whilst characters need a motivation or a desire for something or someone, this does not need to be clear to the audience. A clever script can withhold this information or present it through action later on, but a great character should always want and/or need something. Why is this? Simply, it creates dilemma and choices. In turn this creates conflict and obstacles and this in turn creates an engaging story. This can also drive drama, comedy or pathos and the way that a character reacts to their problems in turn creates our reaction to them as people.

Finally, great characters are also distinct; they are like 'real' people in so much as they are individuals. They may have characteristics and facets that we see in other characters (and people) but as a character they need to stand out in some way. The key is to not develop someone who is so unique or individual that they appear unrealistic or someone that an audience cannot relate to. When developing your own characters, consider what is it that's distinct about your character? What is it that's particular about them? A particularly useful exercise for this is using Resource 5 to try to see what the world looks like from their point of view – to step into their shoes and see things from their distinct perspective. For example, how do things look from the perspective of Mia from *La La Land* compared to Sam from *Attack the Block*? Or how would Indiana Jones see and therefore approach a problem compared to Oskar from *Let the Right One In*? When creating your character, what does the world look like when your character looks out at it? Resources 6 and 7 will allow you to consider this, using a character developed in Section 1 to help explore how a character's background desires of your character affect how they approach conflict or obstacles? It could also be that there is something that your character is withholding, a dark secret for example, that prevents them from acting in a way that most of the audience can recognise. Regardless, it's important to know your characters well enough to know how their personality would to allow for the creation of authentic characters that react as a 'real' person.

Section 2, Resource 5 presents a range of characters from films. For each, watch the associated short clip online that gives the audience an idea of what they are like as characters. If unable to use a clip, choose any section from the linked films and find a moment where the same character reacts to someone or something with as little dialogue as possible. Then, choose two of the characters and try to imagine how they'd react and cope with the provided scenarios. You should find that they react differently based on who they are as people. Some adjectives have been provided as a help; feel free to use others instead or as well as.

Section 2, Resource 6 develops the ability to describe character actions by offering a range of characters and descriptions of them. The task here is to take the different descriptions and make them more visual and more interesting, communicating how the character feels via their external actions.

Section 2, Resource 7 extends character development further by using a character idea that has been previously developed. The activity here is to choose two of the scenarios and try to imagine how the character would react and cope. They should react differently to other people, even in a small and subtle way based on who they are as people and what aspects of their personality has been developed.

Section 2, Resource 8 then provides an opportunity to write a section of a script that demonstrates what that character is like, using only action and a minimal amount of dialogue. In order to truly develop an authentic, interesting and individual character, writing how your character reacts to a scenario can be done *without* using dialogue. This activity is quite simple: using the work and ideas from Resource 7, create a half-page script that uses a slugline to establish setting and then write a correctly formatted action scene that describes a scenario and then how the character reacts to this.
Remember to use the correct format, even if writing in pen, to use the ideas from previous resources and to avoid using dialogue to explain how someone feels or what key information-let their actions explain this to the audience.

A key point to remember is that the audience do not necessarily need to like or admire character-protagonists that make bad decisions or have shady motives. These can be incredibly compelling (see Walter White in Breaking Bad for example) but an audience do however, need to want to spend time with your character/s. One way to achieve this is to ensure that they are emotionally engaging – we need to want to see what they do next, fear for their safety and laugh at their flaws or poor decisions. Your character needs to have some emotions which the audience can empathise with and they need some form of vulnerability, a metaphorical (or physical perhaps?) Achilles heel or blind-spot that makes them universally and therefore relatedly human.