Section Two: Analyses of Specific Genres

Real World Writing: Meet the Screenplay

Pankaj Challa

Pick the odd one out: Reading. Writing. College. Hollywood.

The answer seems obvious, but it's ironic that the industry we do not normally associate with reading or writing depends so much on a piece of writing: i.e., the screenplay.

As one might expect, screenplays are among the most lucrative examples of writing in the real world: a $2 million price tag for a feature-length script is not that uncommon in Hollywood these days. Never mind an original script: Hollywood studios pay big money to those who can "fix" an already finished, but ailing, screenplay. (Such fixers are called "script doctors," many of whom make as much and sometimes more money than, indeed, a doctor.)

Why do Hollywood Honchos pay all this attention to mere words on plain paper?

Pankaj Challa was trained as an engineer (he holds a B. Tech. in Electrical Engineering from Nagarjuna University, India), and has made independent films and written screenplays. After reading a volume of Chekhov's short stories in late 2005, he has turned seriously to the art of writing. He recently received an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Miami, where he was a James Michener Fellow. He is pursuing a PhD in English/Creative Writing at Illinois State University.

If Hollywood Honchos had a way of getting by without scripts, they might have slashed them long ago.

Like with most genres of writing in the real world, screenplays survive only because there is a strong need for them.

How then, does a screenplay look like? How different is it from a more familiar piece of writing, such as a research paper?

To find out, let's meet a screenplay "in action":

EXT. UCLA CAMPUS WOODS--A CLEARING--DAY

pankajchalla 5/1/10 7:51 PM
Comment: this is called a SLUGLINE: tells crew whether scene is interior or exterior, day/night.

Big cypress trees loom over two men who are wrestling: SCREENPLAY, 20s, lean, swimmer's body, in baseball fatigues; and RESEARCH PAPER, a little out of shape and wearing a suit.

Research Paper holds Screenplay in a headlock.

SCREENPLAY
Let go of me, you fat bastard! Okay, okay, you're not fat. Calm down. Lemme just--

Screenplay repeatedly lands blows on Research Paper's skull, who finally lets go and sits on his haunches rubbing the back of his head.

pankajchalla 5/1/10 7:58 PM
Comment: this is called ACTION: all non-verbal activity in a scene.

RESEARCH PAPER
Goddamn you man, that hurt like hell!

Screenplay exercises his neck, cupping his palm over his chin and carefully cracking the neck muscles.

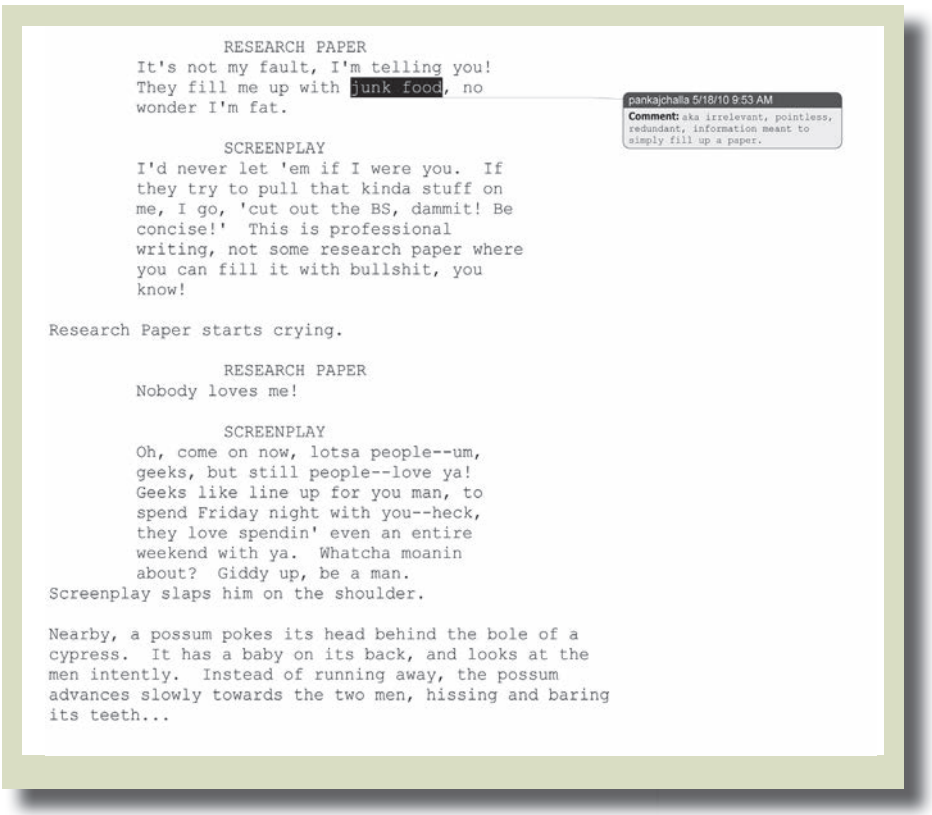
SCREENPLAY
Lemme explain myself. I'm just sayin' people have always tried to kill me, but I'm a survivor, that's all I'm sayin'.

RESEARCH PAPER
I am a survivor too. Oh. I just used a personal pronoun--or rather, a personal pronoun has just been used.

SCREENPLAY
What a weirdo.

RESEARCH PAPER
There you go again--

SCREENPLAY
Take it easy--



RESEARCH PAPER
It's not my fault, I'm telling you! They fill me up with junk food, no wonder I'm fat.

pankajchalla 5/18/10 9:53 AM
Comment: aka irrelevant, pointless, redundant, information meant to simply fill up a paper.

SCREENPLAY
I'd never let 'em if I were you. If they try to pull that kinda stuff on me, I go, 'cut out the BS, dammit! Be concise!' This is professional writing, not some research paper where you can fill it with bullshit, you know!

Research Paper starts crying.

RESEARCH PAPER
Nobody loves me!

SCREENPLAY
Oh, come on now, lotsa people--um, geeks, but still people--love ya! Geeks like line up for you man, to spend Friday night with you--heck, they love spendin' even an entire weekend with ya. Whatcha moanin about? Giddy up, be a man.
Screenplay slaps him on the shoulder.

Nearby, a possum pokes its head behind the bole of a cypress. It has a baby on its back, and looks at the men intently. Instead of running away, the possum advances slowly towards the two men, hissing and baring its teeth...

So: there's an off-the-cuff example of a piece of writing in a screenplay format. What then are the elements of a screenplay: what bricks are used to construct one?

Let's look at a movie clip and work our way backwards to understand the building blocks of film. Copy and paste the following URL into your browser to watch this excerpt from the Coen brothers' film *Miller's Crossing*:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_IEet3GLWzs

What you see in the above clip is a short **sequence**: *a series of related scenes.*

How many scenes does this clip have (up to 2:32, the chandelier close-up)? How many shots? (Answers at back.)

The basic building block of film is the shot. (Compare this to language, where words combine to form sentences, paragraphs, and so on. Similarly, in film, shots combine to make scenes, which in turn combine to make the movie.)

What is a shot? *A single unbroken exposure of film is a shot.*

What is a scene? *An event that occurs in one location and one time.* Say you are making scrambled eggs in the kitchen while listening to Led Zeppelin (you've had a long night), and you hear dogs barking outside, in your garden (they are not your dogs). You go out to investigate. If we were to film this, how many scenes would it make?

Yes, that's two.

Scene 1: INT. KITCHEN—NIGHT

Scene 2: EXT. GARDEN—NIGHT

Again, whenever there's a change in location or time, it's a new scene.

A movie is made up of a bunch of scenes. And writing a screenplay involves stringing together several scenes that collectively form a narrative. Let's look at what goes into each scene in a screenplay.

Slugline

The "heading" that identifies a scene. Each scene begins with a slugline. Here's the slugline from the above example again:

INT. KITCHEN—NIGHT

Notably, the slugline includes the following info in the following order: Whether the scene is interior or exterior (INT/EXT); the location of scene (KITCHEN); the time (DAY/NIGHT).

Action

Everything other than dialog is action: gestures, descriptions, explosions, car crashes, fist fights, kisses... you get the picture.

Dialog

All verbal sounds characters make: whether it's in any known language or interjections.

How might one benefit from being exposed to screenwrting though? How does this connect to the sort of writing commonly encountered in college or professional life?

Appearances aside, screenwriting is really not all that different from other, more familiar formats of writing: it is in many ways just a special case of Business Writing.

Screenwriting follows the same principles any piece of Professional Writing must.

Screenwriting is governed by the "7 Cs of Effective Business Communication" as famously laid out by Murphy & Hildebrandt: Conciseness, Concreteness, Completeness, Correctness, Consideration, Clarity, and Courtesy.

In this way, screenwriting is a sort of cousin to the research paper, and they both share the above seven principles with memos, business reports, and virtually all modes of professional writing.

Let's look at these principles as they apply to screenwriting (and by extension, to business writing).

Conciseness

I'll mention just one reason why this principle is crucial in screenwriting: the conventional page-to-screen ratio is 1:1; i.e., one page of script roughly corresponds to one minute on film. The standard length of an industry screenplay is 120 pages (two hours on film). If you follow the principles and correct format of screenwriting, the page-to-screen ratio will take care of itself; overall, it will remain close to 1:1. But if your language is not crisp and you indulge in rhetorical flourishes, the entire crew will want to strangle you not because they abhor your metaphors, but because you are messing with their estimates. (Yes, estimates—of time and film stock. An entire group of people other than the screenwriter—the crew—plans their day and work around the script. They rely on it for answers to such key questions as, "How many rolls of film do we need for today?" and the always momentous, "How many scenes to shoot before we can break for lunch?") In business too, you want to be concise in memos and related messages; otherwise your employees might laugh at you. They might call you wordy William or wordy Wendy.

Concreteness

Concreteness is about being specific. For example, take the case of a screenwriter who envisions a scene taking place in someone's office with a sink in the corner; but this detail is omitted in the scene description. How is the crew supposed to know that there's a sink in the corner unless the script says so? (Especially as a sink is not part of standard office furnishings usually—the crew needs to know in advance so that they can find an office with a sink or install one on set.) In business likewise,

concreteness is crucial at almost every step. Say you are a car dealer ordering a shipment of cars. How can the order be done successfully without giving concrete, specific details? How many cars are needed? Make? Model? Year? Color? Miss any of these details and your message is not concrete enough to be fulfilled; you'll get an annoyed email or phone call asking you to resend your order.

Completeness

Completeness in many cases goes hand in hand with concreteness. Here's a key question to ask while checking for completeness: does the message include all the required information at the required level of detail so that it fulfils its purpose?

Take the convention of the Slugline in screenplays. Suppose I write:

INT. FARMHOUSE

That's only two parts of the required info: the slugline above does not specify whether the scene is "DAY" or "NIGHT". The crew member in charge of buying film stock will be annoyed: the film used for "day" scenes and "night" scenes is different, and incomplete sluglines translate to an incomplete shopping list. In the everyday business world too, being complete means not leaving out important information. Assume, for instance, that I must send a message informing colleagues about an upcoming event; if the location happens to be deep in the country or otherwise obscure and no directions are provided, the message might very well be incomplete and unsuccessful. Zero guests. Failed event. Duh, you say? Indeed.

Clarity

In a memo, if the writer's sentences are convoluted, or jump around from idea to idea without no seeming connection, he/she will be made fun of in the break room: Confused Keith or Connie and the rest of it. How to be clear though? Here's one tip that holds true in almost all professional writing: try to limit one idea per sentence. In screenwriting, clarity is achieved by keeping sentences simple, crisp, and using active voice and precise verbs when possible. ("*She comes into the room*" is not clear enough; "*She storms into the room*" suggests mood, speed, dynamism. In this case, the verb "storms" is a more precise descriptor, and hence contributes to greater clarity.)

Consideration

If I needed to send a "bad-news" letter to a client, I'd want to be considerate: if I am turning down a request, I ought to be able to put myself in the client's position, empathize with them. (While refusing a request, it is sound business practice to try and suggest alternatives to the client.) This skill of empathy is implicit in a good screenwriter. Empathy is the key to writing good dialog: to create and develop an effective character,

you ought to be able to see the person in your mind's eye, hear them talk, and portray them from the inside out on the page. For this reason, if you are able to write good dialog, usually it means you listen to and understand people well: which in turn points to good interpersonal skills.

Correctness

Being "correct" in this sense means getting facts and figures right: blunders in statistics (or data) in reports, errors in meeting times/locations in memos, all have potentially disastrous consequences. Likewise, in film, if your scene is set in San Francisco and you are using local color, get the facts right about the local jargon. For example, natives of the bay area almost never refer to San Francisco as "Frisco"; terms such as "the City" or "San Fran" are more representative of correct local usage.

Courtesy

It goes without saying that the tone in business writing should never even tend towards the rude/disrespectful. The same principle applies in screenwriting, although in a less visible way: while inter-character dialog and action follow the roughness of real life, behind the scenes, a good screenwriter still approaches each scene with due respect to all characters, trying to understand and portray them as faithfully as possible. Susannah Grant could not have written such a successful screenplay about a single-mom paralegal with a racy dress code (Erin Brockovich) if she was entertaining dismissive thoughts about such people while writing.

Now that we have laid down the rationale for screenwriting, here's the process, in a nutshell, of writing a short screenplay or a short sequence:

I. **Read one or two (or a few) screenplays** to get a better sense of the genre: look below for resources.

II. **Use a screenplay template** (assuming you don't have access to professional scriptwriting software such as Final Draft): There are scores of such templates for Word available online, but many are inaccurate. A template made available for free public educational use on the following website is reasonably close to the standard format:

http://www.keithloh.com/writing/filmscript/templates.html

The webpage includes a template file, invites visitors to "use it, change it," and provides instructions for setting it up in Word.

III. **Prepare a step outline**: Once you have an idea for your short screenplay or sequence, prepare a list of your scenes: specify the "where and when" of each scene, who's in it, and in a line or two, summarize what happens. This is known as a "step outline" and looks something like this:

EXT. GOLF COURSE—DAY
While they finish up on the last hole, Nick and Tom see Andrea driving up towards them on a golf cart, yelling and waving a golf club menacingly. Nick legs it down the fairway and Andrea chases him.

INT. CLUBHOUSE—DAY
Andrea gives Nick a good talking-to while he tries his best to defend himself.

IV. **Develop your step-outline into full-fledged scenes**: Give a moment-to-moment description of what happens in each scene, with action and dialog.

Use the following tips/pointers as you expand your step-outline into a full screenplay:

1. **Scene**

    a. select locations that are varied in texture if at all possible: locations that are interesting audio-visually; ask yourself if you are varying locations/settings between some common dualities: INT/EXT? DAY/NIGHT? Quiet/noisy? Solitary/crowd? Public places/private? Spacious surroundings/more confined spaces? Dark/Bright? Sunny/rainy (snowy)? You are not required to vary scenes in this way necessarily, but depending on your story, explore opportunities to do so.

    b. limit phone scenes as much as possible, as they are visually confining.

2. **Action**

    a. write only what we can "see and hear" (as Epstein often reminds us).

    b. use simple sentences, active voice, present tense, and keep descriptions sharp and concise.

    c. no more than 4/5 lines per para.

    d. the first time you introduce a character in a scene, do this: capitalize their name, and describe them in a way that gives us a sense of their physical appearance and age. Eg, "*JOE sits alone at the table. He is a short, stocky man in his 50s with a prominent scar across his cheek.*"

    e. first line following slugline should almost always be action.

3. **Dialog**

   a. keep it concise: no more than 4/5 lines in one dialog block.

   b. for longish speeches by a single character: punctuate their speech with action.

   c. read your dialog out loud: is it essayistic dialog/spoken dialog? Real speech has a more haphazard syntax: eg, fragments, elisions.

   d. fit speech to characters: age, occupation, personality, diction. (Although sometimes you can play with irony here—as when a child speaks with a surprisingly mature diction.)

   e. keep dialog significant & purposeful, linked indirectly or directly to character goals; avoid commonplaces such as hi, hello (unless they are clearly acting as subtext).

   f. be conscious of "inside words/outside words": avoid putting character thoughts/motivations into external dialog: a character might think something ("inside words") but will usually say something more indirect ("outside words").

   g. the best dialog is rich with subtext.

4. **Anatomy of a scene**

   Last but not least, every scene should have **conflict** of some kind: a scene usually is the product of conflict between at least two opposing forces. Character A wants something: and B is someone or something obstructing that.

A<-------->B

The scene then becomes about how A tries to overcome the obstacle. The scene ends when A achieves the goal or has to give up to return at some other time/approach the problem from some other angle.

That's it, we're done. "**Fin**."

Selected Resources

Epstein, Alex. *Crafty Screenwriting*. New York: Henry Holt, 2002. (*Perhaps the most pioneering and "standard" screenwriting book is* Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting *by Syd Field; he is the sage of screenwriting, but Epstein is more up-to-date and accessible.*)

Grant, Susannah. *Erin Brockovich*. Screenplay. New York: New Market Press, 2001.

Hildebrandt, Herbert W., and Herta Murphy. *Effective Business Communication*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1997. (*Look here for a more detailed discussion of the 7 Cs.*)

Wachowski, Larry, and Andy Wachowski. *The Matrix*. Screenplay. New York: New Market Press, 2002.

Daily Script—Movie Scripts and Movie Screenplays. <http://www.dailyscript.com/movie.html> (*Take these free scripts online with a pinch of salt. A more reliable source for screenplays is a good university library: most carry a few scripts from the popular "Newmarket Shooting Script Series" label, such as the example scripts from the series I've included above.*)

* * *

And by the way, that *Miller's Crossing* film clip up to 2:32 has, if I'm counting right, 55 shots and 6 scenes (downstairs room, living room/stairwell, hallway/corridor, Leo's bedroom, room overlooking garden, and garden outside window).