

A Short Lesson in Scriptwriting - 1/2

This is a short lesson in scriptwriting. If you want to become more knowledgeable and more proficient in scriptwriting, you should consider taking Comm 351 - Writing for Visual Media. For now, this short lesson should suffice for media production courses.

Why write a script? The easy answer is that it's required in this class. More importantly, though, **YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE BASICS OF A SCRIPT AND HOW IT SERVES AS A BLUEPRINT FOR PRODUCTION.** In addition, you should know **HOW TO READ A SCRIPT.** Ideally, every production begins with a script.

So why would someone avoid the scripting process? Lots of reasons, such as laziness or an ego which thinks it can create on the run and do a good job (in reality, very few people can do this, though I've met a lot of producers/directors/videographers who think they can). Working without a script, however, you will shoot more video than you need and even though videotape is relatively inexpensive, you still have to look at it, log it, and work your way through it in the editing process. **AND** you will probably miss some footage that you should have shot.

So let me make this as clear as I can: **IT IS ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL TO SCRIPT PRODUCTIONS.** To avoid the scripting process is to create problems for yourself.

What exactly is a script? It is a written document that lays out the video and audio portions of a production in a specific "format," what is called a **TELEVISION-STYLE SCRIPT**, with two columns: video in the left-hand column and audio in the right-hand column. (In some cases, you might have a narrow middle column for timing but that won't be necessary in this course.)

What do you write? In the video column, you write what will be seen. In the audio column, you write what will be heard. Depending on how detailed you can or want to be, in the video column you might include directions such as framing, camera movement, and perhaps even some editing notes (such as transitions) while in the audio column, you would include dialogue and narration, how they might be spoken, sound effects, music and editing notes. Since the scripts will be the blueprint for your productions, you have some latitude but I will want to see your scripts so I can help you be more effective in the production process.

ALTERNATIVES/ADDITIONS TO A SCRIPT

I would suggest that you should always use a complete script when you can. After all, it's much easier to write exactly what you want through several revisions than to "force" your footage in the editing process. However, at times you might want to employ some alternatives (or "extras") to a full script. One of these is a **STORYBOARD**, which is a visualization of a script with each shot drawn out. (See examples.) Usually, storyboards are developed in conjunction with a script **AFTER** the script is written, though you might find it useful to simply draw out what you want to produce (being sure to include sounds that the audience will hear).

In contrast to a "complete" script, a **SEMI-SCRIPT** is actually for a project that cannot be fully

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scripted, generally because of interviews (you don't know what the interviewees will say, but you would include the questions that you will be asking) and/or uncertainty about what you will be shooting (resulting in a list of shots you would like to capture, what is often called a **SHOT SHEET**). Semi-scripts are most common for documentary projects (or projects shot documentary-style).

A **CONTENT OUTLINE** (sometimes called a **TREATMENT**, though there are a few differences) is more like a proposal for a script. In fact, it might read like a theme or an outline or even just a list of sequences and scenes. As an "outline," you would likely number scenes or sequences, which would later help in developing a paper edit. Quite often, especially in organizational media, the first step in the scripting process is a content outline (whereas treatments tend to be more commonly used in the entertainment side of production).

A **PAPER EDIT** (also known as an **EDITING SCRIPT**) is developed **AFTER** you have done your principal shooting. You would develop a paper edit after **LOGGING** your footage--a process of viewing the footage and making notes that would allow you to structure a story from that footage. For documentary work, it would be somewhat common to begin with a content outline, then record all footage, log that footage, and finally create a paper edit **WHICH WOULD LOOK MUCH LIKE A COMPLETE SCRIPT** but usually with time codes and tape numbers added for the editing phase of the project.

Finally, scriptwriting is not the same as writing "standard" prose and certainly not like formal writing. To that end, there are some rules to help in writing your scripts:

1. Write directions in the present tense.
2. Use clear, concise, attention-getting dialogue and narration.
3. Use the active voice.
4. Use sentence fragments and contractions.
5. Use simply copy.
6. Know your audience.
7. Let the images work for you.
8. Read your copy...aloud.
9. Revise and edit.

CONCLUSION

Scripts are a specialized form of writing that are rarely an end in and of themselves. Instead, they are an integral part of the production process. To skip or ignore this aspect of the production process is to set yourself up to falter or fail. So...sit down and plan out your projects by writing a script or content outline. Your projects--and your grades--will be better for it