

EXT. HOSPITAL GARDEN -- DAY

It is a winter's day. The ACCOUNTANT is asking a white-coated orderly or doctor where BARTLEBY is (although we hear no dialogue). He then sets off toward camera in LS

CUT TO:

TWO

ANGLE ON

The ACCOUNTANT asks the orderly for BARTLEBY.

He discovers his

ACCOUNTANT

Bartleby!

GARDENER

(passing)

Asleep eh?

The ACCOUNTANT be

ANGLE ON

BARTLEBY stares into space. He then disappears. The ACCOUNTANT runs through the galleries to get help. He sees nurses in uniform

MUSIC



# WRITING FOR VISUAL MEDIA

Second Edition

**Anthony Friedmann**



# Writing for Visual Media

SECOND EDITION

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# Writing for Visual Media

SECOND EDITION

Anthony Friedmann



AMSTERDAM • BOSTON • HEIDELBERG • LONDON  
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# What's on the DVD

## Contents

The text is linked to the DVD by an icon placed in the margin throughout the printed text whenever there is supplementary material on the DVD that enriches the matter under discussion. The DVD provides an interactive menu that corresponds to the chapters of the book. All supplementary materials referenced by the disk icon in the printed text can be accessed via this menu. In addition, other ways of navigating allow readers to consult:

- many corporate, and feature film scripts
- storyboards
- video clips of scenes produced from many script examples
- an interactive glossary of camera shots, movements and transitions
- links to relevant websites

Please note many URLs mentioned in the text become active links on the DVD. Some endnotes provide URLs for reference that are not permanent links. Over time, some URLs become invalid because the World Wide Web is a changing environment in which many websites are not permanent or undergo revision.

Readers should understand that the DVD contains a lot of material, especially video clips that have to be recognized by the Director Projector, which they are opening. It can take several minutes to establish all the links before the opening screen becomes available. This depends on the speed of the computer being used and the available RAM. Usually, a black rectangle appears in advance of the contents becoming available.

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## Preface to the Second Edition

The first edition was printed twice and found support in many writing programs. I have used my own book as a textbook in a media writing course and learned a lot that has contributed to improvements in this second edition. I continue to believe that brevity and economy in the length of chapters is suitable to the contemporary college student's reluctance to read. Also in a writing course, reading about writing must be to the point and lead to the practice of writing.

In the interval between the writing of the first edition and the second, technological changes underline the importance of interactive media in the internet and the ubiquitous use of websites for corporate communications. The emergence of DVDs increases the importance of interactive design and the importance of video games as an industry whose size and dollar value rivals the traditional entertainment media. New chapters expand Part IV to look more closely at the emerging issues in writing for interactive media. The convergence of all media into one digital domain on the computer desktop impacts on writing courses and writing training. This convergence is increasingly reflected in the curricula of communications programs such that writing skills have to follow suit and diversify. An introductory course in media writing always faces the dilemma of what media to cover and how much time can be devoted to each.

The aim is to devise a textbook that addresses contemporary writing issues in an accessible way, that incorporates contemporary, interactive technology for the delivery of learning, and that takes account of contemporary script formatting software.

Creation of content for a medium proceeds from writing. Visual imagination lies at the heart of this writing. Visual writing is still the key. In the hunt to pin down the elusive quality of that visual writing, I have come to see that this is fundamentally conceptual writing, what I have come to call meta-writing in this edition. Meta-writing unfolds at several levels. It is visual thinking that precedes and underlies the end product of visual writing that is the script. Visual writing is behind or within the writing that is read as a script. It is embedded writing that underlies the writing we read. A concept dissolves into a treatment, which in turn

dissolves into the instructions for a production in a document we call a script. I have come to see this as the key to understanding how visual media work and, therefore, how we can construct the content for those media. Thus visual writing, or meta-writing, is not the words of the final script but the imaging that makes the words of the final script possible.

# Introduction

## The Purpose

Although this textbook is intended mainly for students in colleges and universities who are taking their first course in writing scripts for media, it is also intended for all writers making the transition to writing for visual media. It assumes that the reader begins with minimal understanding of the nature of writing for visual media. Most beginners have had a large number of experiences viewing visual media: films, television, and video. They probably contemplate the originating creative act that lies behind such programs without much idea of how it's done. They may not understand visual thinking, or if they do, they don't know how to set it down. They don't know formats. In short, they don't know where or how to start. This textbook is designed to get the beginner started. It is not intended to make fully fledged professionals out of beginners, nor to deal with every type of media writing, nor all the issues of scriptwriting, but it does cover all the material a beginner will need to write viable scripts in the main media formats.

This text is meant to be introductory. Other books offer more exhaustive and more specialized information about how to work at a professional level writing for film, television, corporate video, or interactive media. Broadcast journalism for current affairs and sports is another discipline that is well covered in more specialized works. At the end of the book, you will find a selected bibliography containing many of these more advanced books that focus more narrowly on a special type of writing for a single medium together with more general works, and the sources quoted or referenced in the chapters that follow.

## The Premise of this Book

This book is based on the premise that the fundamental challenge arises in learning to think and to write visually, that a script is a plan for production, and that visual media are identifiably different from print media. Although broadcast

journalism overlaps visual writing in some of its forms, other journalistic concerns about sources, objectivity, and editorial issues dominate. Shaping a news story delivered to a teleprompter does not require visual writing. Therefore, this form of scripting is excluded.

Although writing for the audio track has been part of the job of scriptwriting since sound was added to motion pictures some seventy years ago, writing for the ear alone concerns only words that are to be heard rather than words to describe a visual experience on screen. Our focus is a body of technique that is concerned with writing for audiovisual media that are based on sequencing images. Writing for radio, with the exception of a show like *Prairie Home Companion* on National Public Radio, usually consists of writing radio ads, which are a form of copywriting and, therefore, guided by advertising concerns, or it is news and involves the journalistic issues already mentioned. Therefore, writing purely for radio is limited to radio PSAs as an adjunct to visual PSAs. However, in context, writing dialogue, voice-over narration, and other audio concerns are given the importance they deserve.

## Objectives

To become good at your craft, sooner or later you need to specialize. You need to hone and refine your writing skills for the way in which a particular medium is used. This does not mean you can never cross over from one form to another, but the chances are that if you are going to make a living writing for a visual medium, you will have to be good enough in at least one area to compete with the *pros* already practicing the craft. That is a few stages away.

To get there from here you need to learn:

- How visual media communicate
- Visual thinking
- Visual writing
- Scriptwriting terminology
- The recognized script format for each visual medium
- A method to get from brain static to a coherent idea for any media script
- The role of the writer in media industries.

## Secondary Objectives

Even if you don't end up writing for a living, you may have a job that requires you to read, interpret, evaluate, buy, or review scripts. There are dozens of activities that require you to be able to evaluate the written plan that is the script. The script is cheap to produce compared to producing the script. You may need to be able to construe the final product from words and ideas on a page.

Some of the people who have to do this are producers, directors, story editors, literary agents, studio and TV executives, film and video editors, and actors. Other positions in the visual communications industry might also require that you be able to read a script and deduce what it will take to make a product that can be seen by an audience. In addition to the people who have to evaluate and buy or reject scripts, these positions include art directors, set designers, talent agents, casting directors, lighting directors, and sound designers. Virtually anyone who has a role in bringing a script to the screen needs to be able to read the blueprint from which a program is made.

So even if you don't succeed specifically as a scriptwriter, you still need to understand scriptwriting and what makes a script work well. You must be able to follow the way a script translates into narrative images that communicate to an audience. You must be able to read the coded set of instructions that a script embodies.

## The Basic Idea of a Script

If a musician wants someone else to play his music, he must write it down as notes in a form that other musicians can read, decode, and then turn back into music. This problem has been solved in the music world by inventing the musical staff, treble and bass, with a clear set of rules for describing what pitch, what loudness, and what rhythm should be reproduced. Even composers who don't write music need arrangers to write it out for them because most music involves groups of musicians playing different instruments simultaneously. There is always a barrier between the page of music and the auditory experience of hearing the music. You can't hear the score unless you are a trained musician. Even then, you need to play the notes to understand what the composer intended and create a musical experience for a wide audience, most of whom cannot read music or play an instrument.

Likewise, you can't see the script for a film or a video. If you are a trained director or editor who knows how to read a script, you can visualize in your mind's eye what is intended just as the musician can hear in his mind's ear what the music should sound like. You can translate a static page into a sequence of images flowing in a time line. Today's nonlinear video editors display programs in a graphic time line, which is a kind of storyboard metaphor for the content of a program. In the end, the production process is needed to make the script into images that are accessible to all viewers who cannot read a script, nor frame a shot, nor edit a sequence to make narrative sense.

Like all analogies, this one breaks down. Musical scores are used over and over again for numberless performances, whereas a script is used only once. So another useful analogy is the blueprint, the drawings an architect makes for a builder or contractor to erect a building. After the building is finished, the blueprint has little interest except perhaps for maintenance or repair. The people who buy the house,

or live in it, may not be able to read the plans any more than the audience at a concert is able to read music or an audience for a film is able to read a script. The home dweller hardly thinks about the plans of the house, even though this person may have strong views about how successful the building is to inhabit. If you like living in the space, then that is a measure of the building's success.

Likewise, if you watch a TV series, like a movie, or understand a corporate message, you don't think about the scripts on which they are based. You get an audiovisual, intellectual, and emotional experience. You laugh, cry, reflect, or go into a rewarding imaginative or mental space. So a script has little value except as a blueprint to make something. Think of it this way. You couldn't sell many scripts of *Star Wars* or *Jurassic Park* (name your favorite movie), but you can sell a lot of tickets to see the movie made from it—millions of tickets in fact.

## The Learning Task

Your job right now is to begin to understand how you put this plan, this score, this blueprint for a movie together. Whether it is a public service announcement, a corporate communication, or a feature film, you have to figure out the process. You have to learn in what forms media industries communicate, buy, sell, and produce their ideas. You have to try it out before big bucks or your next month's rent are at stake.

The most difficult part of writing is the constant revision. The fact is that we have to rewrite and revise until we get it right. Writers whose work you watch on TV and in the movie theater have spent a long time studying how it's done. One day, I was explaining this to a communications student who played on the college basketball team. I asked him what the coach had him do in basketball practice. His eyes lit up and he described some of the shooting drills. Then I asked him what he thought the equivalent drills would be for a writer. He wasn't so sure, and did not understand that a similar degree of practice is the foundation for successful writing.

We need to think about how we can score some points in this writing game. If you have to shoot thousands of baskets so as to be able to sink a foul shot, let's think about what it takes to get to be good enough to score consistently in a competitive writing game. Some people will put in a lot of time practicing basketball because they love the game. Scriptwriters keep writing because they love the medium and they love to create. Isn't it the same idea? Practice, practice, practice! Don't give up! Don't get discouraged when your ideas don't work out right away, and, above all, enjoy the creative act, even if you don't make points every time!

## Using the DVD

This text is designed to work in tandem with a DVD. Interactive computer technology provides us with a new opportunity, hitherto impossible to achieve in a

textbook, to link script blueprint and resultant image in the visual medium itself. Although the printed book contains some examples of scripts, the DVD provides many more and also more complete scripts. Script samples are frequently linked to finished video clips on the DVD. It also provides a visual glossary of script vocabulary for camera shots and movements. An icon has been placed throughout the text whenever the DVD is referenced. The interactive navigation is modeled on the chapter outline so that all the links for a given chapter are accessible under the heading for that chapter. There are also other options for interactive navigation that follow themes or topics. Demos of scripting software, which is now indispensable to the professional writer, can also be found via active links on the DVD so that you can download trial versions of some of them.

## Conclusion

This book is about learning the fundamentals of scriptwriting. It is designed to take you from nowhere to somewhere, from no experience and no knowledge to a basic level of competence and knowledge of what the issues of scriptwriting are. It gives you a chance to explore your visual imagination and try out your powers of invention. Later, you can confront the full range of writing issues particular to each genre in each medium by taking more advanced media writing courses dedicated to specific media formats, or by reading more advanced texts, or by further self-directed writing experience.

In the end, you learn, not by reading, not by thinking, and not by talking about doing it, but by doing it. "Just do it!" as the Nike ad says. Write!

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# Defining the Problem

## PART ONE

Many people, and perhaps some of the readers of this book, will start out with confidence in their basic ability to write but be unsure of how they should apply it to the writing of a script. To understand how to write for the visual media, it is important to understand how such writing differs from the writing most of us have learned to do up until now. To break through these habits and become a scriptwriter, we need to see what the specific problems are. Above all, we need some kind of method to solve them. The first part of this book is devoted to a logical and pragmatic analysis of why scripts are written a certain way. If you understand the problem, you will understand the solution. It also introduces you to a basic process of thinking, a method of devising content, and a method of writing in stages or steps. You need to know how to do it.

I had always thought of myself as a good writer, and I liked writing before I ever wrote a script. A lot of you might feel the same way. I started writing scripts in order to have something to shoot in film school. After all, I could hardly hire a professional, and people around me were too busy doing their own projects to help out with mine. Besides, I wanted to write my own script. A lot of you are probably students in media production and will have to invent content for production projects. We all learn the hard way, by trial and error. The following chapters are intended to minimize those errors. Although there is a considerable body of craft to learn, this part of the book is about what a writer should understand before dealing with specific media and their formats. Let's begin.

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# 1

## Describing One Medium Through Another

The essential problem of writing for visual media comes from the difference between print as a medium, or words on a page, and the medium of moving images. You have to describe an audiovisual medium that plays in real time using a written medium that is abstract and frozen in time. So a description in words on a page of what is to be seen on a screen has limited value until it is translated into that medium itself.

### Writing Not to be Read But to be Made

The fundamental premise of scriptwriting is that you are writing not to be read, but to be made. Just as the musical score is a set of instructions to musicians and a blueprint is a set of instructions to builders, a script is a set of instructions to a production crew to make a film, a video, or a television program. Only the ideas, scenes, and dialogue that are written down get made. This is the first principle to keep in mind. Whatever your vision is, whatever your idea is, whatever you want to see on the screen, you must describe it in language that a team of technicians and visual image workers can understand.

A script is fundamental to the process of making a movie, video, or any type of visual program. It is the basis for production. From it flows a huge number of production decisions, consequences, and actions. The first of these is cost. Every stroke of the pen (or every keystroke) implies a production cost to bring it to reality on the screen. Although the techniques of filmmaking and special effects are seemingly without boundaries these days, extravagant ideas incur extravagant cost. A writer must keep in mind that he writes a production budget with every word by virtue of the visual ideas contained in the script, whether that script is for a feature film or a training video. A script writer can reach an audience only by visualizing and writing potential scenes for directors and producers to shoot and edit. The finished

work often reflects a multitude of creative choices and alterations unspecified by the writer.

## Writing, Producing, and Directing

It is often said that a good script can be ruined by bad producing and bad directing, but good producing and good directing cannot save a bad script.

Producers and directors have a more recognizable role in the process because production is visible and material. However, the role of writer is sometimes combined with that of either producer or director. Some writers can direct, and some directors can write. Writing and producing can also be combined. If you study program credits, you will see some of these dual roles and combined responsibilities. Some individuals attempt triple responsibilities. Among the Academy Award nominees for 1998, James Cameron had a writer, director, and producer credit for *Titanic* (1998). Atom Egoyan, a lesser known Canadian director, had a triple credit in *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997).

As a rule, audiences pay little attention to the scriptwriter and often don't recognize the producer or director. Audiences identify with the actors they see on screen. However, they do so only because the writer has created the story that the audience wants to hear, the characters that it believes in, and the words that it accepts as those characters' words. A film or a television series gets made because a producer, a director, and sometimes key acting talent respond to the potential of the script idea. The script expresses the primary imaginative vision that can become a successful program.

The writer's work is somewhat isolated because the writer is the originator. Others are waiting for the scriptwriter to deliver before they can do their work. However, strong collaboration can occur between the writer and the producers and directors, and sometimes with other writers. The scriptwriter's work is less isolated than that of the traditional novelist, poet, or biographer, because those writers write their words to be read directly by the audience. They do not need any intermediary, except perhaps a publisher, whereas a scriptwriter is never read directly by the audience and needs a team of skilled technicians as intermediaries and a risky investment of millions to create a result visible on screen.

In the entertainment world, the viewing audience is usually much larger than the reading audience for a book. It is a measure of the media age we now live in that visual media are so predominant in our imaginations. In fact, the very word "audience" is a carryover from another age when audiences listened. The word derives from the Latin *audio*, meaning "I hear." Perhaps we should invent a new word, "vidience," from the Latin *video*, meaning "I see." Printed media no longer have the monopoly they have enjoyed for five hundred years since the Gutenberg era and the invention of the printing press. With the invention of the motion picture by Edison in 1895, a visual medium was born that, with its electronic derivatives, has probably

displaced the print medium as a primary form of entertainment and now rivals it as a form of communication. Audiences today are primarily viewing audiences.

Since the invention of the motion picture on film, these visual media have multiplied in type and nature so that a range of visual communication types now exists that requires scriptwriting of many different kinds. After movies came television and a dozen different types of program requiring a variety of writing talents. From television came portable television or video, programs recorded on a single camera and edited to be distributed on videotape rather than broadcast. Other exhibition media based on microchip technology synchronizing slide projectors led to extravagant multi-image and multimedia projections for business meetings, museums, and exhibitions. This led to video walls that involve composing images across banks of nine or twelve TV screens. New combinations of video and computer technology have led to the creation of interactive multimedia both for entertainment and instruction published on CD-ROMs, DVDs, and web sites.

Scriptwriters are indispensable to all of these visual media. Their craft and art lie behind every program. Every time you watch a program on television or see a movie or watch a corporate communication, remind yourself that it began as a script—as words on a page. Don't walk out of the movies or switch the television channel when the credits roll! Look for the scriptwriting credit! According to the Writers' Guild agreement with the producers of movies, the script credit must come immediately before the director's, which is always the last credit.

## Moving from Being a Viewer to Being a Creator

This brings us to the next point in your transformation from a beginner into a competent scriptwriter. Most of us begin with the experience of being an audience. We grow up going to the movies and watching television. A complete media experience written, produced, and edited is presented to us for our enjoyment. We are conditioned to be passive consumers of these images. We learn to interpret them. We do not think intensively about how they were created although some might have had a mild curiosity about this. We just enjoy them.

You begin to be a scriptwriter when you start to think about how the story got invented, who wrote the dialogue, who decided what the voice-over should say, whether it could have been better or different. It is a change of mind-set. A member of the audience decides to get up and cross over to the other side and become a creator. The writer creates for an audience. A writer has to know what it is to be an audience, but an audience does not have to know what it is to be a writer. This transition in awareness and in point of view must take place before you can function successfully as a scriptwriter. The following chapters are designed to engender that transition. It will take time. You are an apprentice to a craft. Where do you begin? Because you are writing in one medium for another, you have to change the way you have been used to writing, which was meant to be read

by an audience, and instead write so that your writing works as a set of instructions for a production team.

## The Producer Cannot Read Your Mind

Everything begins in your mind, in your imagination. Unless you write down what you see and hear, no one else knows about it. Beginning writers sometimes forget this. Unless the script contains a clear description of your vision from beginning to end, with no gaps, your vision will not reach the screen. The production people who make the script into screen images cannot read your mind. Rule number one: Do not hand over your scriptwriting prerogative and responsibility to the director or actor, or anyone else whose job it is to translate your script into a program. Too often they will take it and do something other than what you intended. If you leave blanks, they will fill in those blanks from their own perspectives. They have to—it is their professional responsibility. There are no empty frames in movies or television.

## Instructions to the Production Crew

Consider the differences between the following sentences:

A man is sitting in a car watching the entrance to a building . . . .

and,

A young man, unshaven, sits in a sports car, watching the entrance to run-down apartment building through binoculars.

To shoot the first statement leaves a number of decisions to the director and art director—What type of car? What year? Is it period? What street? What else is in the shot? Crowd? Extras? Day? Night? What is the man doing in the car? Does he drive up? Time has to be allowed to set up the shot and rehearse. Permits are required to shoot in the street. These details may not be critical to your scene, but writers have to think all the time about what they should specify and what they can leave up to the good judgment of the production people, mainly the director. As a general rule, be specific. However, to provide answers to all of the questions above would result in an unusable script, encumbered with unnecessary and unacceptable production detail.

There is a prevailing sentiment that everyone wants to get the script right before proceeding with production. To change a script involves work and expense. However, until there is agreement about this crucial document, it is difficult to advance the project. The script becomes the common denominator of a production

to which everybody refers. Production people use the script to make budgets, schedules, sets, select a cast, and choose locations.

## What is the Role of a Scriptwriter?

Because scripts are indispensable to production, writers are indispensable to the producers in the industry. This would seem to put writers in a powerful position. In practice, though, the scriptwriter seems to be the least valued contributor and the most abused.<sup>1</sup> Once a writer delivers a script and is paid, power to shape the end result wanes rapidly or even ceases. The producer and the director take control of the process. That is why the script must express a convincing vision and be a clear plan. Successful collaboration between a writer and director is the basis for good films and television programs. The producer's role is to bring about such collaboration and make it possible by finding financial backing.

## The "Script" Writer is a New Kind of Writer

The invention of the motion picture also brought about the need for a new kind of writer. In the early days of silent film, one-reelers and two-reelers were shot without scripts. The first writing job was to write the title cards and dialogue cards that were intercut with action scenes from time to time. More complex stories and longer films needed a scenario (the precursor of the treatment of today) that was written down by writers who could visualize and write action continuity.<sup>2</sup> Scenario, photoplay, photo-drama, now replaced by screenplay or script, were all new terms to describe this kind of writing. The new visual medium required a new kind of writing that described what was to be made visible on the screen. It had to describe the visual content of the frame or shot. It had to describe sequences of shots that would make narrative sense. It had to be a document that could be used as a plan for production. It required a visual writing. It required screenwriting. Seeing how early scriptwriters invented techniques and ways of writing for the screen tells us a lot about the problem.

Many of the early writers for the new medium were women. Anita Loos (*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*) wrote for D. W. Griffith and the Biograph Company. Margaret Turnbull, Beulah Marie Dix, and Marion Fairfax wrote for Famous Players-Lasky.<sup>3</sup> Literary writers of novels and plays were recruited by William de Mille to dignify the vulgar image of movies with sometimes disastrous results because writers despised the medium and condescended to write mainly for the money.<sup>4</sup> It seems clear that nobody really knew how to do this kind of writing. By the 1920s, the idea of writing for the movies had taken hold and many phony writing schools were advertising to the public: "No physical exertion required—invalids can succeed. Learn in five day's time. Start to write immediately."<sup>5</sup> Very quickly the need for visual writing



that translated to the screen and for writing that anticipated practical production realities led to a new writing profession.<sup>6</sup> In the 1930s after the advent of sound, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences set about finding a standard form for the screenplay.

Everyone who tries to write for the moving picture medium and its derivatives goes through a personal evolution somewhat like the industry did. You learn about the problem of composing for a visual medium and struggle with finding a form in which to express it. You do not have to reinvent the wheel, just understand why the wheel was invented. Your job is to learn the conventions of the form and layout of a script that the industry has worked out by trial and error. If you do not follow these conventions, you set up barriers to having your work accepted.

## What is Visual Writing?

Everybody has heard the old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words. Visual writing means making images stand for words. A clock face tells you time is passing. In the classic western *High Noon* (1952), the characters frequently look at the clock, and the audience sees a cutaway because the time left before the noon train is a powerful plot element. An outlaw recently released from prison and sworn to revenge is arriving on the noon train. The former marshal who put him in prison, just married and now in a dispute with his Quaker wife before they have even left on their honeymoon, desperately tries to recruit a posse but finally has to confront his enemy alone. Although visual writing for the screen involves description, it is not necessarily descriptive prose with a lot of adjectives. An image communicates both by logical deduction and emotional implication. A visual medium makes demands on both by using signs, symbols, and icons. You can tell the bad guys from the good guys in a Western without subtitles. Their hats, style of gun belt, clothes, and whether they are shaven or unshaven all let the audience know how to understand the character. Visual writing means writing and thinking with images that the audience will see, rather than words they will read.

How do you write with visual ideas as opposed to writing visually descriptive prose? We are all familiar with descriptive prose:

In the late summer of that year we lived in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels. The troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees were too dusty and the leaves fell early that year and we saw the troops marching along the road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and the soldiers marching and afterward the road bare and white except for the leaves.

The plain was rich with crops; there were many orchards of fruit trees and beyond the plain the mountains were brown and bare. There was fighting in the mountains and at night we could see the flashes from the artillery. In the dark it was like summer lightning, but the nights were cool and there was not the feeling of a storm coming.<sup>7</sup>

This visually descriptive opening to Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* is, no doubt, admirable prose fiction. However, it would not work for a film script. The freedom of the novelist to assemble impressions and condense impressions over time (written in the past tense) into a mood or atmosphere that is the setting for characters and action is hard to duplicate in film or television. It is barely conceivable that a moviemaker would reproduce all of these visual images, even in a montage. A scriptwriter cannot assume the freedom that the novelist has. A lot of descriptive imagery is irrelevant to the visual medium. If the nights are cold, saying so in the script does not translate onto the screen; to do so with a line of dialogue would be heavy handed. You have to show someone shivering or putting on a sweater—all very costly in screen time unless critical to the story.

The omniscient narrator is a novelistic device that is hard to duplicate in a screenplay unless you create a voice-over narrator. In a novel, the narration is verbalized. In a screenplay, it must disappear. Whether you are adapting an existing work or writing an original script, the imaginative challenge is to select a key setting and a key image. Do we choose the flashes of artillery at night? That would be quite demanding to shoot. A script can't deal with the simile of comparing it to summer lightning. Do we choose the soldiers marching by raising dust with the crops, orchards, and mountains in the background? This is probably more concise cinematically and requires the right location. If we describe it too closely, the location search becomes impossible. Do we need to see the stream and the pebbles? Do we need to see the dust on the leaves? It is unrealistic for the writer to impose this kind of detail on the production. The director will resist when faced with the concrete task of choosing a location and a camera angle.

Essentially, the writer has to introduce action. This is true not only for movies and television, but also for corporate and instructional programs. The description that sets the scene is usually subordinate to character and action. The art is to combine them. Six pages on and some time later, Hemingway gets to a street scene with characters and interaction. On the seventh page, the first dialogue interchange between the narrator, a priest, Lieutenant Rinaldi, and a captain occurs in the mess hall. Two pages of dialogue in which the mood of war is introduced could easily take 5 or 10 minutes of screen time and a lot of money to create with lead actors, a crowd, sets, props, costumes, and locations. Yet by the end of Hemingway's Chapter 2, we barely have a title sequence for a movie. Good novel! Bad script!

A scriptwriter has to invent a visual sequence that will condense background and action in such a way as to advance a story. This could be achieved by a number of devices.

**Solution 1:** *Create an observer.* A character could be riding a bike down the road with the scene in the background and the column of soldiers in the foreground. He arrives in the village. The street scene is established. Cut to the Mess Hall.

**Solution 2:** *Create a montage.* We see quick cuts from artillery flashes in the night. Cut to column of soldiers marching past. Quick cut to ambulance. Cut to civilians hiding from gunfire. Cut to ripe fruit in an orchard. Cut to Lieutenant Rinaldi in the Mess Hall.

**Solution 3:** *Use audio to add value to the scene:* Interior night, Mess Hall, Lieutenant Rinaldi, a captain and a priest in terse conversation with an American. Between phrases, the sound effect of an artillery exchange rattles the glass faintly from the shock wave of an explosion. Flashes of nearby artillery illuminate the faces near the windows.

Some screenwriters invent scenes in their adaptations that are not in the original work, or even change the plot, often to our great annoyance. Is it laziness? Is it legitimate adaptation? Sometimes, what works in a novel doesn't work on screen. A novel can be hundreds of pages long. A feature film is a 120-odd pages of script for 100 minutes of screen times. As we saw earlier, there are plenty of ways to achieve the necessary economy of action. This linking of actions and condensing of actions is visual writing. We might be better off calling it writing with visual ideas. It works by narrating through a sequence of images. The scriptwriter has to think in terms of physical action because everything in a screenplay is seen on the screen. The scriptwriter's job is to describe action as the camera sees it.



When screenwriter Ben Hecht adapted Hemingway's novel for the movie of 1957, he adopted a narrative voice-over technique (see DVD).<sup>8</sup> Lieutenant Frederic Henry sets the background of the story of the war as we see him return from leave. He walks past a military column of pack mules and a company of Italian troops against a backdrop of the village of Orsino and evidence of war damage. He gets a wave from a girl from the window of a brothel over a local bar before he enters the ambulance pool adjoining the hospital. Now we meet characters, and dialogue between them moves the plot along.

In the final analysis, the solution to adapting Hemingway may be to cut out this opening and start deeper into the story. At this point, you might decide you'd rather be a novelist. On the assumption that you are still open to scriptwriting as an option, let's proceed.

## Visual Writing

So the first understanding of visual writing entails writing for the media result, a description of what the audience will experience. There is another aspect to visual writing that I will call meta-writing. This writing, or perhaps this thinking

(sometimes an unwritten concept) often determines the structure of media content. However, it is not necessarily the plot itself, nor the story; it is the visual idea that makes the content work for a given medium. It can be a dramatic conflict for a story, but it can also be the visual idea that makes a billboard work or a television commercial succeed. Often it requires a visual metaphor that carries the theme. It is usually embodied in the written creative concept.

To understand this better, let's illustrate meta-writing. Titanic! As soon as you say the word, you conjure up a major ship wreck, tragic loss of life, survivors, all things that you can see. The love story in the film is a storyline and plot that is superimposed on the meta-writing. Jurassic Park! The genetic reconstruction of dinosaurs in an island theme park is a visual idea. The characters and the storyline are superimposed on it. Meta-writing has great importance in corporate communications, which often depend on finding a visual correlative for an abstract idea-change, for instance. Although change itself is an abstract idea, it can be understood through visual metaphors such as weather, a river, a speeded-up growth sequence of a plant, or speeded up sequence of decay. The DVD has a video clip for EMC Corporation on information flows and management. It is made comprehensible emotionally and intellectually by images of water in motion, such as waves, rivers, and waterfalls. So meta-writing is that writing or thinking that enables the writing of the key concept.



## Where do We Go from Here?

We are ready to look at some of the specific problems of setting down the writer's vision, namely, describing images and sound for production. We will learn how to do so in incremental steps. One way is to reverse engineer a scene from a movie or a television program. From your experience of seeing a scene, turn your role around and try to describe what a production crew would need to know to remake that scene. Even though you don't yet know how to write scripts, trying to do so introduces you to the essential problem. This will start you thinking about how you describe things and how you lay out this information on a page.

A good way to approach this is to find a movie with a published script and study how the visuals on screen relate to the script. A word to the wise, however; published scripts are usually postproduction scripts, release scripts provided for dubbing foreign language versions or for publicity. They are made from the finished movie for distribution, dubbing, and publicity purposes. A postproduction script seldom corresponds word for word with the production script, and it is usually written by a person other than the scriptwriter.

## Differences Compared to Stage Plays

Another way to isolate the special nature of scriptwriting is to compare it to play writing. Stage plays do not usually describe action in detail. Stage directors and

designers have greater latitude to decide on the staging and the blocking. Stage plays assume a constant point of view based on the proscenium stage with a consistent sight line. The scriptwriter has to be concerned with physical action and a specific point of view anywhere within a 360-degree compass. Action must be described as it is framed by a camera lens and by a camera movement. The words spoken by characters, the dramatic dialogue, although part of the script, do not present a visual writing problem except perhaps when dialogue stops the action (see a discussion of this issue in Chapter 10).

Plays are not always visual and depend heavily on dialogue. Novels describe emotions. Visual media have to show emotions. So a script is not a novel though it may be adapted from a novel. It is not a play though it is sometimes adapted from a play and becomes a screenplay. It is a unique form. A screenplay and many shorter scripts can be original, not based on a source work. A writer can also write or compose directly for the visual medium.<sup>9</sup> Although visual writing means thinking in terms of images rather than describing visual things, visual writing also means leaving out obvious and unnecessary scenes no matter how visual. The scriptwriter has to construct visual meaning out of sequences of images whether he is communicating a corporate message or adapting Hemingway. Original visual writing for a script means doing this in your head.

## Writing With Dialogue

Colin Welland wrote an original script, *Chariots of Fire*, produced by David Puttnam, about two British runners, Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams, who competed in the Olympic Games of 1924. *Chariots of Fire* won the Academy Award for best picture in 1982. Here is the scene of a college race in which we meet Abrahams, a main character. Welland introduces the theme of running and competition and establishes the social setting and the social class of the characters in this Cambridge University setting.

EXT. TRINITY COURT MID-DAY

ROBIN

Mr. Abrahams—your position please!

HAROLD MOVE FORWARD. A HUSH DESCENDS ON THE COURT. THE CROWD CRANE THEIR NECKS AS HAROLD TOES THE LINE TO FIND THE BEST GRIP.

ROBIN

(addressing the throng)

Owing to the absence of any other challenger,  
Mr. Abrahams will run alone.

A VOICE CUTS IN

VOICE

Not so Mr. Starter!

ALL HEADS TURN-TO SEE, HURRYING THROUGH THE CROWD, HIS COAT THROWN OVER HIS SHOULDER ANDY LINDSEY. CROOKED IN HIS ARM IS AN UNOPENED BOTTLE OF CHAMPAGNE. HAROLD IS AS AMAZED AS THE REST. ANDY TOSSES HIS COAT TO THE OPEN MOUTHED AUBREY AND THE BOTTLE TO HARRY. HE'S RESPLENDENT IN ETON RUNNING STRIPE.

ROBIN

Your name and college if you please sir.

ANDY

Lindsey. I race beside my friend here. We challenge in the name of Repton, Eton and Caius.

CHEERS AGAIN.<sup>10</sup>

The dialogue, although natural to the characters, advances the plot. The description is necessary to the action. It also sets up an action scene, which creates interest and anticipation for the audience.

## Writing Without Dialogue

Consider the opening of *Bartleby*, a contemporary adaptation of the story *Bartleby, The Scrivener* by Herman Melville. The images establish an urban setting, the anonymity, alienation, and isolation of the main character.

INT. TUBE TRAIN -- DAY

BARTLEBY is sitting next to the window in silhouette. Light rain streaks past the window as the train flashes past London suburbs. The train plunges underground. Fade in Music.

CUT TO:

INT. TUBE STATION -- DAY

A train arrives in the station and stops. People pour out across the platform. In the middle, we catch a glimpse of BARTLEBY.

CUT TO:

INT. TUBE ESCALATOR -- DAY

Side shot from parallel escalator descending of BARTLEBY riding up the escalator. He is motionless. The background moves by.

CUT TO:

INT. TUBE ESCALATOR -- DAY

LS of BARTLEBY, one of a line of people riding up escalator. MS BARTLEBY. He is motionless. Most of them are looking straight ahead. BARTLEBY looks towards camera as it descends past him.

CUT TO:

INT. TUBE STATION -- DAY

CAMERA TRACKS and PANS past a long bank of 24 hour lockers coming upon BARTLEBY putting a bag into a locker at chest height.

DISSOLVE TO:<sup>11</sup>



This visual sequence without dialogue is the cinematic equivalent of novelistic description. Cinematic description is often implied by the setting, crowd, action, and movement of the camera. All good scriptwriters try to write with images and show action.

Some scriptwriting is down to earth. Here is a description of a shipping sequence from a corporate video:

MONTAGE OF 55-foot Truck and trailer backing up to a loading bay, hand signals between driver and bay. Forklift loads the Truck. Securing for the journey. Shutting the trailer door.

This is not inspired prose. It just describes essential action. What it looks like on screen will be decided by the director on location, by the placement of the camera, and by the chance availability of certain trucks and forklifts. Scriptwriting is primarily an art of organizing images to tell a story or communicate a message.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have looked at adapting existing material and inventing original dramatic writing. Starting with an examination of something familiar, namely movies, reveals some of the ways that scriptwriting is different from writing prose. A later chapter deals with more of these issues. There are many other kinds of scriptwriting. Some have particular page formats governed by production methods such as multicamera live production. All scriptwriting involves clear description. A hundred years of development since the beginning of motion pictures have led to techniques of writing and a specific camera and audio vocabulary to help do the job. You need to learn these recognized conventions for describing certain recurring visual frames. This requires a chapter of its own.

## Exercises

1. Write your description of a short scene from a TV series or a movie so that another production crew could recreate that same scene. Invent your own way of writing a one-page script.
2. Look at a video of a film with a published script and read the script while you study the video. Start by using a silent film, say, a Charlie Chaplin film such as *Gold Rush*. Here are a few movie titles for which you can find a postproduction script: *Citizen Kane*, *Casablanca*, *Taxi Driver*, and *The Piano Player*.
3. Select a scene from a Shakespeare play or any other play, by Bernard Shaw or Henrik Ibsen, for instance. Then identify what would not be clear for film production. What do you have to add to make a film or television sequence? Can you use all of the dialogue? Do not write a script; instead write an analysis of what would have to change or be added to adapt it to film.
4. Write a present time action description for the opening chapter of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. Decide how to condense the action. Make a list of shots describing visuals only. Set yourself an objective of no more than three minutes of screen time.
5. Write a present time action description of the opening of a movie adaptation of J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. Make a list of shots describing visuals only. Decide what screen time will work.
6. Compare a book you have read with the movie based on it. See if you can identify a key scene in the movie that wasn't in the book. Analyze why! Also look for a scene in the book that wasn't in the movie. Analyze why! Find a scene that is in both and examine how the adaptation has worked.
7. As an exercise in visual writing, try to create an image or a one-shot scene that communicates primary emotional situations: anger, fear, humor,



curiosity, conflict, danger, deceit, hope, fatigue. The challenge is to show it without words and without literal-minded solutions such as a close-up of an angry face for anger.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>In terms of authority, screenwriters rank somewhere between the man who guards the studio gate and the man who runs the studio (this week)." William Goldman, *Adventures in the Screen Trade* (New York: Warner Books, 1983), p. xii.

<sup>2</sup>Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), p. 270.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 275.

<sup>4</sup>One literary writer, Edward Knoblock, wrote hopelessly: "Words fail to describe the scene that follows." Brownlow, p. 276.

<sup>5</sup>Brownlow, p. 278.

<sup>6</sup>"Writing for films was a new craft, having little to do with established literary forms. An elegant turn of phrase was of no use in a silent-movie script (unless it appeared as an intertitle). The plot and the visual ideas were what mattered." Eileen Bowser, "The Transformation of Cinema 1907–1915," in *History of the American Cinema*, vol. 2, ed. Charles Harpole (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990).

<sup>7</sup>Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup>Ben Hecht wrote a screenplay for the movie version of *A Farewell to Arms* (1957). There was also an earlier production in 1932 starring Gary Cooper and Helen Hayes.

<sup>9</sup>See Paul Schrader's screenplay for *Taxi Driver* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990) and his other writings.

<sup>10</sup>Unpublished script of *Chariots of Fire* (1982) written by Colin Welland.

<sup>11</sup>*Bartleby*, unpublished screenplay, Pantheon Film Productions Ltd., distributed by Corinth Films, New York. See DVD for complete version.

## Describing Sight and Sound

# 2

Writing a script, simply put, involves describing what the eye sees through the camera lens and what the ear hears on the audio track. This is where we should start. It sounds easy enough. The problem, as we found out in the previous chapter, is knowing what to leave out. When you try to write a script for the first time, you usually end up describing too much, or not thinking concretely about what is seen within the frame. You must describe the essential visual event that happens in front of the camera, but without preempting the basic production responsibilities of the director. Describing what the camera sees means understanding the basic technique of shooting and what separates one shot from another. To communicate your intentions (and a script is nothing but a set of intentions that others must make concrete), you must let go of some habits that have been drilled into you for writing expository prose. Other habits must take their place.

### Describing Time and Place

Consider this example. Look out of the window and describe what you see. First write it as prose. It might go something like this:

It was a drizzly fall day. Leaves had collected in the gutters and created wet skid traps on the asphalt. The wind was stripping the last few leaves clinging to the branches. A car went past with a screaming fan belt. A jogger slapped through the soggy leaves exhaling rhythmic puffs of vapor and disappeared around the corner. The phone rang. Alessandra turned to answer it. Tears made rivulets in her makeup.

This is descriptive prose for an essay or a novel, not Hemingway, but the problem is similar. The events are brought together as an assembly of impressions without reference to order in time or place. To describe a scene is not the same as visualizing the sequence of images on a screen and then describing it so that a production crew

can make it. The camera is like a robot. It sees only what it is in front of it. Anything not in front of it cannot be admitted to the description of the scene. What the camera sees is always in the present. Cinematography and videography record in the present–now. Therefore, the description of what the camera sees is always in the present tense—always.

Human vision scans a scene. The eyes move, the head moves, and the angle of acceptance of the human eye is very wide. Most important of all, the eye is connected to a brain that selects and interprets the visual information delivered by the optical nerve. The brain can assemble and arrange impressions in any number of ways. A camera interposes an artificial eye between the scene and the eye of the audience. That is what makes the medium an art. The audience only gets to see what the camera lens frames, which issue from the scripted scene. The artificial image on an emulsion (film) or an electronic scanning (lines, pixels) are visual experiences separate from reality, just like an artist's canvas is a visual experience apart from the reality that inspires it.

So let's take the same scene and explore how it would work to write it as a script. Always ask the question: what does the camera see? This means thinking about where the camera will be physically set up and in which specific direction it will point. The camera always expresses a point of view. Therefore, you must use it. The director has the final decision about these matters. You describe the possibilities.

Your first decision as a scriptwriter is to imagine whether we see the scene from the interior looking out or whether we play the scene as an exterior. You express this with an abbreviation: INT. (interior) or EXT. (exterior). The director, the camera crew, and anyone working on the shoot know the practical implications of this abbreviation.

The next piece of essential information is to describe where the action is taking place. This can be a word or two, such as STREET or LIVING ROOM. Next you have to decide what time it is, day or night. Again this has implications for lighting and production. You write: DAY or NIGHT. Occasionally, you can specify a particular time such as dawn or sunset.

We now have three critical pieces of information necessary to every scene in a script that tell a production crew a great deal about what they have to do and what they have to plan for. These three pieces of information are arranged in a well-recognized sequence called a slug line, e.g.:

INT. LIVING ROOM DAY

## Describing Action

So far so good! Your next job is to describe some action or object or person that you want to be seen within the camera frame. Now you need to think about how large or how small this frame is and about what is in the foreground and background.

The description could go like this:

INT. LIVING ROOM DAY

We see a figure in silhouette against a window. Through the window a suburban street is visible with trees. The leaves are falling. It is windy and raining. A car drives past. It has a screaming fan belt. A jogger runs past. His breath is visible. A telephone rings. The figure turns toward camera, and we see tears on her face.

This could be enough. What has changed from the written prose we looked at earlier? The description is in the present tense. Descriptions of action in scripts are always in the present tense as if we are seeing everything in front of us right now playing on a movie or TV screen. Another difference is that most descriptive adjectives and poetic embellishments are removed. We reduce the description to simple, short statements of action. Sometimes, it is permissible to write in incomplete sentence fragments that would usually get red ink corrections in composition classes. Try this:

INT. LIVING ROOM DAY

LS with figure in silhouette in foreground against a window. In background through the window a suburban street with trees. Leaves are falling. It is windy and raining. A car up and past. SFX a screaming fan belt. A jogger runs past. His breath is visible. SFX telephone ring. The figure turns. We see ALESSANDRA's face in CU, tears running down her face.

This is probably enough. It could be shot as one shot by racking focus (see definition below), or it could be broken down into two different shots, one interior and one exterior. Also, specifying a CU (see definition below) or deciding what size of shot should frame the figure is optional.

Try another version with an exterior:

EXT. STREET DAY

LOW ANGLE of a woman at a window. REVERSE ANGLE of the street-leaves are falling. It is windy and raining. A car up and past. SFX a screaming fan belt. A jogger runs past. We see the steam of his breath. The figure turns away from the window.

Now we have to visualize a different shot, which involves a different camera setup. So the scene has to be written as two separate shots that have to be

produced separately. Even a script written the first way might inspire a director to cover the scene with an exterior and an interior. In fact, a director might shoot close-ups of the runner, or cutaways of the leaves, or a long shot of the window, none of which are specifically written into the script.

INT. LIVING ROOM DAY

The street scene of the previous shot in the background. The phone rings. ALESSANDRA, in silhouette against a window, turns to the camera and reveals a tear-stained face. She answers the phone.

Deciding which way to play the scene is a writer's prerogative. The scriptwriter is all powerful for the moment. In reality, once the script is turned over to production, the writer's power wanes, as we learned in the last chapter, and the director assumes control. The interior version is cheaper to produce because it involves only one setup. The interior/exterior combination is visually more interesting and introduces more dramatic complexity. It takes more time to do two setups and, therefore, more money.

## Describing the Camera Frame or the Shot

You may have picked up other features of scriptwriting style in these examples. CHARACTER NAMES and CAMERA ANGLES are usually typed in uppercase. Most important of all is the specialized language that describes the way a lens produces an image, often written as an abbreviation, such as CU. This is not a book about production. Therefore, we do not want to go into camera work in an exhaustive way. However, the following commonly used terms and abbreviations—and their meanings—must become part of your working vocabulary. The DVD provides an interactive glossary of live-action video or stills to illustrate every type of shot.



### Camera Shots

- |     |                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| VLS | Very Long Shot. There is no precise definition about what is very long, other than that it should include the whole human figure from head to foot, all of the action, and a good view of the background. |
| LS  | Long shot. A long shot should include the whole human figure from head to foot so that this figure (or figures if more than one) is featured rather than the background.                                  |

---

MS	Medium Shot. A medium shot, like all of these shots, is defined with reference to the inclusion or exclusion of parts of the human body. So a medium shot is usually just below the waist. Keeping the hands in is one way to visualize the shot. It is definitely well above the knees.
CU	A Close-Up frames the head and shoulders leaving head room above the head. A close-up captures facial expression or the detailed characteristics of an inanimate object.
TWO SHOT	Although this is not an abbreviation, it is a common term that describes two people in close-up or medium shot. The wide-screen format (2.75:1 ratio) of the movie screen and the new HDTV format (16:9 ratio) for television make good use of this frame.
BCU or ECU	A Big Close-Up or Extreme Close-Up frames the head so that the top of frame clips the forehead or hairline and the bottom of the frame clips the neck.
WIDE ANGLE	This term is somewhat loose. It generally means a long shot or an establishing shot that shows the whole scene. It refers to a shorter focal length lens.
OVER-THE-SHOULDER	This shot, as the name implies, frames two figures so that one is partially in the frame in a quarter back view to one side while the other is featured in a three-quarter front view. This shot is usually matched to a reverse angle of the same figures so that the values are reversed.
REVERSE ANGLE	A Reverse Angle is one of a typical pairing of two matched shots with converging eyelines. They can be Medium Shots, Close-Ups, or over-the-shoulder shots and are shot from two separate camera set ups.
LOW ANGLE	A Low Angle means pointing the camera lens up at the subject, whether an object or a person.
HIGH ANGLE	A High Angle means pointing the camera lens down at the subject, whether an object or a person.
RACK FOCUS	Racking Focus, also known as pulling focus, refers to a deliberate change of focus executed by twisting the focus ring on the barrel of a lens during the shot. This technique is typically used to shift attention from one character to another when they are speaking and the depth-of-field is insufficient to hold both in focus at the same time. It is commonly used in television drama and movies.

Although you should know these terms, and although they will be needed from time to time to convey what your vision is, you should be careful not to pepper your script with minute camera directions. Too much directing of the script by trying to choose camera frames clutters up the script and encumbers the director. The director has to make a decision based on the real scene in front of the camera on the day of shooting. I have shot many of my own scripts and had to abandon visions of how it was supposed to be because the lens would not accommodate the idea. The performance of lenses is governed by the laws of optics, which limit what they can do. The principal limitation is in the way foreground and background can be contained in focus in what is called the depth-of-field. This could be a weakness of the interior version discussed earlier. The figure and the exterior scene will not both be in focus. As the figure turns, the camera crew will have to rack focus to feature the face. All of these problems of execution are the province of the director and his crew. A rule of thumb might be to give a camera direction only when it is indispensable to the visual idea on which your scene rests. Otherwise, leave it to the common sense of the director.

## Describing Camera Movement



You need to learn the terms that describe camera movements. Camera movements change the size or perspective of a frame, the angle of view, or a combination of these. (See the DVD for live-action video of each camera movement.)

- |       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| PAN   | Pan stands for panorama. It is the most common movement of the camera. A pan can move from left to right or vice versa, sweeping across a scene to give a panoramic view. The most common use of this camera movement is to follow action while the camera platform remains stationary.                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| TILT  | A tilt is a movement of the camera platform to angle up or angle down in a continuous movement along a vertical axis. It is useful for following movement. Panning and tilting are often combined in one movement to follow motion in two dimensions.                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| TRACK | A track refers to the continuous movement of the camera platform in one direction, usually alongside a moving figure. This is accomplished by putting the camera on a dolly that runs on tracks or by hand holding the camera while walking alongside the action. Professionals almost always use a gyroscopic Steadicam mount. This enables the camera operator to maintain a constant frame around a moving object or person. The camera platform can also be mounted on a |

vehicle or any other moving object. Tracking was an early innovation in camera movement in silent movie days.

**DOLLY** A dolly shot is similar to a tracking shot in that the camera platform moves, but it moves toward or away from the subject so that the frame size gets larger or smaller. A similar but different effect is obtained with a zoom lens.

**ZOOM** A zoom is an optical effect created by changing the focal length during a shot with a specially designed lens that has a variable focal length. The effect makes the frame larger or smaller like a dolly shot. The important difference is that a dolly shot maintains the focal length and depth of field throughout as the camera moves nearer or farther away. The zoom uses an optical effect without moving the camera to change from a wide angle lens to a telephoto lens so that it appears to the viewer that the subject is closer or farther away. The depth of field will change as the focal length changes.

**CRANE** A crane shot is made by raising or lowering a camera platform usually with a crane or boom. It can also be achieved with a helicopter-mounted camera at great expense. In a low-budget production, a smaller scale crane effect can be done by bending and straightening the knees while hand holding the camera.

## Describing Graphics and Effects

In contemporary television and video, a significant proportion of program content, especially commercials, is generated by computer imaging software output to video. This includes titles, 2-D and 3-D animation, and computer-generated optical effects that produce layers of video. Graphics and live action can be combined to create almost anything imaginable, including images that defy logic and natural laws. Metallic insects, hybrid creatures, science fiction worlds, a face metamorphosing into a different face or object (known as morphing)—all of these images are created without using a lens or light-sensitive medium to record a real-world scene. Therefore, the slug line has no meaning when describing a computer-generated graphic. A useful convention to adopt in place of the slug line is a heading: **GRAPHICS**. This graphics slug line announces to all production people that this scene does not have to be shot but must be scheduled for postproduction by the editor or by a graphic artist.



If you need a graphic image or graphic animation in your script, you need to describe it as you see it. If it is a 3-D animation, you can resort to the conventional frame descriptions to visualize the scene. For example:

CU spaceship, seen from a low angle, looms overhead filling the screen.

A title is created either in a character generator or as part of computer graphic imaging. It is created in postproduction and needs to be identified by another slug line separate from a shot or a scene. You can indicate this by a simple slug: TITLE or CG.

## Describing Transitions Between Shots

Transitions between shots are predominantly decided by the director and the editor. Although all scripts begin with FADE IN FROM BLACK, and often designate a DISSOLVE or a MIX in place of a CUT, it would be inappropriate for a writer to try to pin down the director or editor at every transition between scenes. As with other camera directions, sparing use for specific cinematic reasons will command attention, whereas constant use will irritate postproduction people who will probably ignore them. Let's take a look at the terminology used to describe transitions between scenes. (See DVD.)



- CUT** The most basic and indispensable transition on which modern visual editing relies is the cut. In the early days of film, movies were short, sometimes consisting of one shot that lasted for a few minutes. Modern motion picture editing was born when directors shot more than one angle so that the rhythm and pace of a scene could be controlled in the way shots were edited. Some scriptwriters write in a transition in uppercase at the end of every scene: CUT TO. Some scripts are written with the understanding that any transition is automatically a cut unless some other transition is specified. D. W. Griffith, the silent film director, is usually credited with the invention of editing innovations based on cutting shots together that are still in use today—cutting to a close-up for emphasis and cutting away to a detail of a scene, which is out of continuity.
- CUTAWAY** A cutaway is a shot of some detail within the scene, something like a clock or a telephone that is not part of the continuity of action, or a cutaway of, say, the feet of

a runner. An editor can cut away to it without concern for its match to the previous or the following shot. Experienced directors always shoot plenty of cutaways to solve continuity problems in the editing phase. For the writer, the use of the cutaway would be to emphasize the dramatic or narrative importance of an object. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the classic western *High Noon*, scripted by Carl Foreman, cuts away to the clock as a dramatic device to increase tension for the audience because the bad guy released from the state penitentiary is arriving on the noon train to take revenge on the marshal who put him away. This cutaway could be written in by the scriptwriter. Some cutaways, however, are created by directors and editors.

DISSOLVE/ MIX TO	In film production, anything other than a cut has to be created in the optical printer from A and B roll offsets. The editor marks up the film so that the lab technician can move the printer from the outgoing shot on the A roll to the incoming shot on the B roll. In video, the mix is made with a fader bar that diminishes input from one video source as a second is added. In video, the term MIX TO is preferred.
SUPER	In the middle of a dissolve when 50 percent of the printer light or video source comes from each picture, a temporary effect called a superimposition is produced. This effect is now created digitally within nonlinear editors. A superimposition is simply the mix or dissolve mixed into the mid-printer light or mid-fader position and then out. Beginners often go to unnecessary lengths to describe the way titles superimpose on picture or a background. A sentence can be reduced to "SUPER TITLES over black", "SUPER TITLES over LS of street" or "SUPER flashback action over CU of face."
FADE IN FROM BLACK	All programs begin with this effect, which is simply a mix from black to picture. Sometimes you might write in this effect to mark a break in time or sections of a program.
FADE OUT TO BLACK	All programs end with this effect, which is a mix from picture to black, the opposite of the fade in from black. Logically, these two fade effects go in pairs.
WIPE	A wipe is the effect of an incoming image pushing off the outgoing image. A wipe is more commonly a video effect. Every switcher has a number of standard wipe patterns.

The most obvious are a horizontal and a vertical wipe in which the two images are separated by a moving line that bisects the screen. The other basic patterns are circle wipes and rectangle wipes in which the incoming image grows from a point in the middle of the outgoing picture as an expanding shape. The corner wipe is a variation. The incoming picture starts as a rectangle entering from any corner of the screen. Once again, a scriptwriter should think very carefully before writing in such detailed transitions. It is better to leave it to the director and editor in postproduction.

DVE Transitions between shots have become so numerous, because of the advent of digital video effects (DVEs) in computer-based editors and mixers, that it would be impossible to list the dozens of different patterns and effects. Once again, this is the province of postproduction unless you have a very strong reason to incorporate a specific visual effect into your script.

## Describing Sound



The sound track is an enormously vital part of any program. There are basically three ways that sound works to intensify the visual image. The most obvious element is voice. The human voice is our most important means of communication. Speech or dialogue is commonly recorded in sync with the image of people when they talk. So the words we write for sound track, the manner of delivery, and even the gender of the voice, all contribute to the final result. If you listen to any sound track carefully, you will hear more than just the synchronized sound that was part of the scene when it was shot. Most dramas involve two other elements that are not part of the camera recording.

The second kind of sound that we use is the sound effect, either in sync with something on screen, or as a pure effect, natural or artificial. If we see an explosion, we expect to hear the sound effect. If we see a dog barking, we expect to hear it. Then there are ambient sounds that complete a picture or an impression of time and place without sync. An example would be a scene in the country reinforced by the sound of bird calls, or a city scene given greater realism by the distant sound of sirens and traffic.

Lastly, the emotional impact of music on a scene is well understood by makers of theatrical films and documentaries, and corporate and advertising programs. The right music can lift a scene that, in visual terms, is quite ordinary. Cutting footage to music allows the musical beat to reinforce a visual expectation and tie them together.

So visual writing has to include audio writing. You have to think about sound sometimes when you are writing visuals. The three elements of a sound track have to be mixed together in postproduction in what has become an elaborate and demanding multi-track mix. Both music and sound effects are usually added later in postproduction. Scriptwriters do not normally describe every aspect of this multi-track mix. Audio recordists and directors and mixers make production decisions as to how to produce the sound track of your scene. The exceptions are when you want to emphasize the specific dramatic, comic, or informational use of sound effects. So we mention specific sound effects or music cues only when they might otherwise be left out by the production team or because they have special significance. A character hears footsteps approaching, or hears a door opening off screen. That has dramatic significance.

If you are an editor or have been involved in editing film or video, you discover how ordinary shots can be transformed by music or sound effects, or how cutting a montage to a beat can transform ordinary and mundane shots into something visually interesting. So aesthetically and technically, we have to acknowledge that sound alters the value of images for a viewer. Sound cues are part of the scripting language that we need to learn.

Here are the abbreviations you should learn when working with sound directions.

- SFX                      This is a convenient abbreviation for SOUND EFFECTS. Instead of describing a thunderstorm and the sound of thunder at length, it is sufficient to write: SFX thunder. In postproduction, whoever assumes responsibility for the audio tracks will pull a stock effect from a bank of effects on a DVD or from an audiotape. A sound effect is anything other than speech or music.
- MUSIC                    A music track is created independently of camera production. Music videos begin with a defined sound track. Other programs have music added in postproduction to fit the dialogue, sound effects, and mood. The writer does not usually pick music or decide where music is necessary. The exception is when the music is integral to the idea, or in a short script such as a public service announcement (PSA) in which detailed conception might include ideas for music. If you do write in music cues, there is a correct way to do it, by using the following terms.
- FADE IN                 Almost all audio events are fade in and faded out to avoid a click as the playback head picks up a snap cut to music or effects at full level. This also permits us to use music cues that do not necessarily correspond to the beginning and end of a piece.

- FADE OUT** This is the audio cue that most people forget to use. They fade in music or effect and then forget to indicate where the audio event ends. Mixing multi-track sound depends on fading in and out of different tracks. The fade-out diminishes the loudness of the sound down to zero over an interval, short or long, according to taste so that it avoids an abrupt cutoff and does not shock the ear or draw attention to itself. Many commercial recordings of popular music are faded out at the end, whereas classical music has a specific ending to the composition, the loudness of which is controlled by the performer. Library music that is sold by needle time for specific synchronization rights for designated territories is generally recorded without fades so that the audio mixer of a program can make the decisions about the length of fades. This music is recorded in convenient lengths of 30 and 60 seconds. Some pieces are longer with variations on the same basic theme so that the piece can be reprised at different moments on the sound track. Also, small music bridges, riffs, and teasers are available of the shelf for editors and audio mixers to use.
- FADE UP** A fade up is a change of level in an audio event that needs to be featured again after being faded under. Music tracks need constant fading under and up to clear dialogue. This kind of cue is seldom needed by a writer.
- FADE UNDER** Fading under an audio event such as music is necessary when you want the event to continue but not compete with a new event that will mix from another track, typically dialogue or commentary. You should understand that these types of decisions are largely made by audio mixers and editors. Nevertheless, you should know these terms for the rare occasion when you need to lock in a specific audio idea in your script.
- SEGUE TO** This term means to cross-fade two audio events. It is the audio equivalent of the video mix. You do not need to write this into the audio side of a script every time you use a **MIX TO** (see above) transition. It is understood by all involved that one goes with the other.

We are discovering that the writer needs to know as much about production as possible, but also needs to know when not to intrude on the work of production and postproduction personnel. Only so many detailed decisions in making and finishing a program can be incorporated at a given moment in the production. It is unnecessary and silly to give instructions that cannot be used.

## Shot, Scene, and Sequence

Now that we know the nuts and bolts of describing sight and sound in an individual shot, we need to think about how those shots go together to make scenes, and how scenes go together to make sequences. In dramatic writing, there is a larger structural unit carried over from theatrical writing called an act. This is used in television scripts (see templates on DVD) and is usually implicit in screenplays. Chapter 9 discusses large-scale structure that gives a script shape, rhythm, pace, and meaning.



## Finding a Format for the Page

The last problem to solve for the beginning scriptwriter is to determine the accepted way of laying out a script on the page. You must respect well-established conventions. They evolved by trial and error for specific reasons. In a professional setting, using the right script format is crucial. Not to do so proclaims your ignorance of the business you are trying to break into. Your script will probably also be harder to read if you don't follow the accepted conventions. Fortunately, computer software makes this part of the job easy. Most word processing applications can be formatted with macros to create any script layout. Dedicated scriptwriting software is also available. Some of the specialized software such as Movie Magic Screenwriter also plugs into budgeting and scheduling software that saves time and money for producers. In the professional world, you must get to know some of these systems<sup>1</sup>. (See DVD.)



## Master Scene Script

Two broad types of script formats or page layouts are in common use. The first, called a master scene script, reads down the page and is close to a theatrical script in that way (see sample script format in the Appendix). It is written according to a plan that includes a slug line for every scene. In fact, if any information in your slug line no longer applies to the action you are describing—that is, if the time and place have changed—you must start another scene with a new slug line. The scenes are not numbered. Character names are typed in uppercase, as are camera terms. Dialogue is centered, indented, and separated from the description of action, which is margin to margin. This format is used for feature film and TV film and usually anything that involves characters and lines of dialogue.

## Dual-Column Format

A dual-column format is the other main type of script format. It has to be read from left to right because audio and visual elements are separated into two columns

(see sample script format in the Appendix). The description of everything that is seen on screen is placed in the left-hand column. The description of everything that is heard on the sound track is placed in the right-hand column. Each scene therefore consists of a pair of descriptions. For anyone involved in production, this is an ideal arrangement because it accommodates production techniques. For a reader, it is awkward to integrate what you read in left and right columns and then move down to the next pair.

What we are discovering is the difficulty of describing visual media via print media. That is the nature of the problem. Remember the analogy of the blueprint. An architect or designer has to represent a three-dimensional object in two dimensions on the page. Likewise, we, as scriptwriters, have to represent a multimedia time continuum in writing. Writing is a four thousand year-old technology that is still indispensable for many forms of communication, and the printed page is a five hundred year-old technology that is still an immensely successful medium. You are using it right now. However, writing and printing do not do justice to audiovisual media. A script is, in effect, a specialized kind of writing, just as a blueprint is a specialized kind of drawing. To solve the problem, a script would need to be a kind of musical score, a visual representation, and a verbal description combined. There is a suggestion of this in the documents that describe interactive media as we shall see in a later chapter in Part IV.

In the end, each format—that is, each way of organizing the page—has its advantages and disadvantages. A master scene script has to combine visual and audio descriptions. In production, these have to be disentangled. Because such scripts are usually driven by dialogue, the main audio event is read in alternation with the description of action, so the reader has to assimilate them and integrate in alternation going down the page. In the dual column script the problem is presented in a different way to favor production and requires the reader to assimilate pairs of audio and visual elements while parsing down the page.

## Storyboard



Meanwhile, the best answer that the industry has devised to represent the moving picture media is known as a storyboard (see DVD). It was developed by art departments in advertising agencies to get over the problem of clients reading and interpreting scripts visually by supplying them with sequential drawings of key frames. It is similar to the problem of understanding blueprints. Architects visualize the result for non-technical clients with models and sketches. TV ads and PSAs almost always get rendered as storyboards before going into production. Some directors storyboard dramatic scripts, especially sequences involving special effects. A scriptwriter might not be a good artist and, although capable of writing excellent scripts, might not be capable of drawing. An artist who can sketch the key frames probably has no scriptwriting skills. So creation of a storyboard generally requires

collaboration. It is a good idea to sketch a storyboard for certain sequences even if your drawing consists of crude stick figures. It helps you to visualize what you are trying to describe in scripting language.

New computer software has transformed traditional roles by creating libraries of characters and backgrounds with powerful routines that can vary camera angles, size objects, and change perspectives. Text can be imported into caption areas. This allows almost anyone to create a storyboard. The more film and television rely on sophisticated computer-generated effects, the more important storyboarding will become. There is already a trend to create program content directly with images in an imaging medium that sequences frames. StoryBoard Artist, a program developed by PowerProduction Software, will even let you add sound files to the frame. The storyboard as produced by such computer software is halfway to an animated movie.



## Conclusion

After reading this chapter, you should have a useful repertoire of scriptwriting terms and conventions that enable you to deal with the detailed problems of describing sight, sound, and transitions. You now have the building blocks of scriptwriting. You need to try them out in small-scale exercises. Then the larger issues of devising script concepts and content and of writing scripts for specific program formats can be brought into perspective. The chapters that follow take you through the stages of script development and the process of devising script ideas and building them into a finished product that is ready for the production team to carry to completion.

## Exercises

1. Write a camera description of yourself getting up and having breakfast. Use the camera vocabulary you have learned from this chapter. Think about what would you describe and what would you leave out.
2. Watch a simple real-life scene such as people having an argument, a cop giving a driver a ticket, or action in the street, on a bus, or in a restaurant. Now describe what a camera would see—what would appear on a screen if it were a movie? Describe it as you want to see it on the screen.
3. Listen to an auditory event or experience that involves more than one type of sound, namely, voice, sound effects, and, if possible, music—a restaurant scene, for example, or a scene in nature. Write an audio-only script using the terminology you have learned in this chapter. You can add your own music to your scene.



4. Write a scene that comes from your imagination, describing both visual and audio elements. Don't be concerned about format. Just confront the problem of describing what you want to get shot.
5. Take a short scene from a short story or novel and adapt it for the screen. How do you want to lay it out on the page? Choose a master scene script format or a dual-column format. (See the Appendix and DVD.)
6. Choose a short scene from a short story or novel and make a storyboard for it.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup>Visit <http://www.writersstore.com/> to see the range of formatting and story development software. This is also useful source for book, seminars, and courses on writing.

# 3

## The Stages of Script Development

Scriptwriting is a process. It begins with gathering information, thinking, analyzing, and questioning, and ends with devising a creative visual idea. This idea then needs to be developed through some kind of outline or treatment and then be scripted in a format appropriate to the medium concerned. This script format lays out a set of descriptive instructions in a special language about what is to be seen on the screen and heard on the sound track. We can break the scriptwriting process down into well-recognized stages. In fact, they are so well-recognized that the stages have names that are also reflected in the contractual agreements that sometimes govern professional writing of this kind. Let us outline this process by stages. Some of these stages may change places in the sequence depending on the nature of the writing job:

- Background research and investigation
- Developing a creative concept
- Pitching or verbal presentation
- Concept outline
- Treatment
- First draft
- Revision
- Final draft

### Background Research and Investigation

Part of the process of scriptwriting often involves background research or investigation of the subject matter before you define the objective or outline the content.

Experience tells you when you need to get information. Sometimes it is at the beginning of the creative thinking process. Sometimes it is in the middle. Research could be necessary to define the target audience. Consider a public service announcement (PSA) on smoking. Although you have general ideas about the effects of smoking on health, you do not have facts and figures. Research enables you to say with conviction how many Americans die annually from smoking-related diseases. If you are devising a PSA about battered women, you need statistical facts and possibly psychological background before you can think about what is relevant, let alone make an assertion about the topic. Before you can say it, you need to know it. So research is gathering information that enables you to be authoritative and specific about the subject.

Even entertainment concepts require research. An imaginary story is often set in a time period or has a background. To make a story more believable, you need authentic detail embedded in the scenes. If your story concerns airline pilots, you need to know how they talk and what their world is like. To write a scene that involves cockpit talk, dialogue has to be credible and realistic. To write an episode of *ER* or any other hospital drama, you have to describe medical procedures and use meaningful dialogue between characters who are doctors. If you want to appreciate the research that might precede writing a screenplay, read about William Goldman's research before writing his original screenplay *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*.<sup>1</sup>

Research can be undertaken in any of several well-proven ways. You can consult encyclopedias, visit a library, or search the internet. You have probably used a library catalog for a research paper. Research for scriptwriting is not much different. Everyone finds a particular style or method that works for him or her. Index cards are very effective because they enable you to shuffle and reorder the material, and they help you to find the right sequence for ideas. Some scripting software, such as Movie Magic Screenwriter (see the DVD), has an electronic index card system that allows you to do it all on computer.

If you are working on a documentary project, background information about your topic is necessary to construct a meaningful narrative and to write a voice-over commentary. Researching a project for visual media is different from term paper research because you not only need a factual background, you also need images—old photos, engravings, artifacts, and locations. Every scene in the script must be represented by an image. Suppose your script is historical. A good example would be the Civil War documentary by Ken Burns.<sup>2</sup> You cannot interview Civil War veterans, but you can interview historians who are knowledgeable about the Civil War. You can film locations of some Civil War battlefields. Location research is critical to this kind of project. You can shoot existing images such as photos, engravings, and paintings. All of these images have to be found. A number of picture libraries sell the use of pictures from their collections, including the Library of Congress, which has a huge collection of photos that are



in the public domain. Finding the right picture is a specialized task. There are people called picture researchers who make a living doing this particular kind of research.

Students will often propose short projects and pick documentaries about big topics such as AIDS or drug addiction. Most people find that their knowledge is very general and that the archive of available images is limited. Choosing such a project means doing research. A student of mine wanted to make a video about stress and how to combat it in college life. To do so, you need definitions of stress, statistics, and reliable information. One of the issues was healthy diet and exercise. You need to make statements about diet in the voice-over that are true and authoritative. All of these requirements lead to research. Obviously, research takes time, and sometimes money, if you have to travel to research a location or visit a library.

Before you can order a copy of an image or the text of particular statistics, you have to find them. The emergence of the World Wide Web has made research easier both for getting information and finding images. Clearly, picture libraries and photo agencies will become prime users of the web because they can show their product online, sell it online, and even deliver it online in one of the picture file formats such as TIFF or JPEG. The cost of digitizing a photo library is high, but it is the way of the future because commercial users of pictures are now able to buy pictures as digitized files ready to download onto their computers and manipulate in a program like Adobe Photoshop. It also simplifies the task of searching a collection for the image you want.<sup>3</sup> This will be particularly relevant to production of web sites and CD-ROM and DVD programs for which most writers should be preparing themselves. Technology changes the way we have to think about media.

Another example of research is collecting background information about a product or a process for a corporate program. In order to write about the client's product, you may need to read manuals and brochures and interview people in the company who are knowledgeable about the product. These people are sometimes known as subject matter experts, or SMEs. This is particularly true if the content is technical. You have to learn enough about the subject to be able to make decisions about what is relevant or interesting to the designated target audience. If you are writing about a medical product, pacemakers for example, you have to pick the brains of a cardiologist. This means you have to know how to get to the right people and how to formulate the right questions. In a corporate context, your client usually guides you to many of the contacts you need.

At what stage do you do your research? Some kind of research and investigation is usually necessary to get going and to stimulate your thinking, so it logically precedes everything else. Research could also come later in response to your need to know about specific things in order to make accurate statements. At a later stage, you may need to do audience research. If your production has a commercial purpose,



it is quite possible that questionnaires, surveys, or focus groups would be called for. Then when you have defined your objective, communication problem, and target audience, you might have to research background information in order to devise your content. You might see a specific need for expert knowledge at this point.

For the PSA on smoking, you know you want to make a dramatic statement about how many people die each year from smoking-related diseases in America. You might want to compare it to another figure such as how many people die in automobile accidents or how many Americans died in the war in Vietnam. Making a statement like that is effective because it puts the statistics in perspective for the audience. A statement that makes the audience realize that smoking kills more people every year than all those who died in Vietnam will have lasting impact. It makes the audience think. The populace would not accept American war casualties of that order every year without huge political consequences. Yet for some reason, the lingering deaths of hundreds of thousands of people from all sorts of smoking-related diseases is acceptable. Our attitudes shift based on our knowledge and awareness.

To get information about smoking-related deaths or drunk driving deaths, you might look at government statistics. These are published annually in reference works that are available in public libraries.<sup>4</sup> The Vietnam War statistic is a fixed historical fact that you would need to find. It would be extremely effective to say, "Four hundred twenty thousand Americans died last year from smoking-related diseases. That is more than eight times the number of American casualties in the whole Vietnam War."<sup>5</sup> Do you want to be one of them?" Being able to say, "Roughly forty-eight percent of all traffic deaths in the United States are caused by alcohol" is a stronger statement than some generality about the dangers of drunk driving. You need a fact to reinforce a good punch line, such as, "If you drink and drive, death could be the chaser."

Investigation and research overlaps with journalism. The difference is that research for visual writing is not just about verifying facts; it is about finding pictures and getting visual information from which you can construct a script. Knowing facts or background information does not tell you how to construct a script, or persuade or entertain an audience. The same kind of information could be the basis for an article by a journalist or a book by an author.

### *Interviewing*

People are another source of information. Some people are experts in their field. If they speak with authority, you might want to use them directly on camera as part of your program. Sometimes, you need the point of view of the man in the street, or you need to interview someone who represents a certain class of people. For documentaries and corporate programs, you need to find subject matter experts, people who have extraordinary knowledge based on a lifetime of research or direct personal experience. Since these interviews are often once-only opportunities, you need to

prepare intelligent questions and have follow up questions. There are a number of classic concepts for structuring an interview. The funnel technique begins with broad and general open questions and narrows down to specific closed questions. The inverted funnel does the reverse. An interview can be conducted by telephone and internet, as well as in person. Whatever the method, it is also critical to record the interview accurately with an audio or video recording device. Sometimes, you discover that the interviewee is interesting enough to write an interview into the program.

#### *Location Research*

For film and video production, location research is very important. Unless you have the budget to create artificial interiors in a studio set, you have to find a setting in which to shoot. For exteriors, you have no choice. You are obliged to find a location. If you want a sea shore with a sandy beach, you or your producer must go and find it. If you want period buildings, you have to find a town or a street that fits. Rather than write and create locations searches, it often makes sense to research the locations first because they give you ideas for visuals. This is particularly true for corporate programs. Because the story or message usually has little visual information, you have to make it visual. Abstract ideas become concrete when you stand in a place or see the surroundings. Location research can make the difference for a writer. Visual writers need visual ideas. You get visual ideas by being in the environment of your topic. This is important to remember when negotiating a writing fee. Including an allowance for travel time, research time, and related travel expenses is important.

Writers of scripts still have to make the transition to the visual medium concerned. This is why the seven-step method discussed in Chapter 4 is useful. To write a script, you have to think in the medium itself. This process starts with the loose, wide ranging activity of creative sketching and digging for ideas. It is popularly called brainstorming.

## Brainstorming and Freeing Your Imagination

You can't write a script with just facts or information. You have to write with visual ideas. These ideas may allude to facts or information, or even embody that information. Getting a script going depends on your imagination and, more specifically, on your visual imagination. There isn't a sure-fire method for stimulating this process that works for everyone. By trial and error, you learn what helps you think visually and creatively about the medium. Nevertheless, we can enumerate several techniques.

Brainstorming usually means just writing down all your ideas as they come to you without constraint or formality. It means stirring up your imagination by free

association and by doodling. Making lists, drawing diagrams, and sketching images in storyboard sequences usually does the trick. The most important element of this process is to feel free to think or visualize whatever comes to mind. Very little should be rejected at this stage. By its very nature, this kind of writing produces more material than you will finally need or use. Therefore, it leads to a necessary selection or editing process.

Sooner or later you need to make some kind of outline. One good way to work on your program is to outline it by listing key sequences or key images. You can use index cards. This allows you to shuffle the order to experiment with finding the most logical or the most meaningful order. Logic is not the only way to communicate, though. Sometimes, visual communication works best by being an emotional communication, such as showing a shocking image that disturbs the viewer. Visual exposition is not the same as writing essays in English composition. For example, there is no good verbal equivalent for a kaleidoscopic montage.

## Concept

The first formal document you create in the scriptwriting process is called a concept or an outline. Whatever you call it, its function is the same: namely, to set down in writing the key ideas and vision of the program. This document is written in conventional prose. There is no special format for it. It does not cover all the plot or content, nor does it include dialogue or voice narration. It is primarily an idea in a nutshell from which the script in all its detail will grow. A concept is written to persuade a key decision maker, such as a producer, director, or client, that the project idea is on track and should go forward to the next stage. Its importance for the writer is that the vision of the script is clearly expressed and clearly understood. Like a sketch that precedes a painting or a model that precedes a sculpture or a drawing that precedes a building, a concept shows others the scope and potential of what the end users are going to get. The writer needs to know that whoever is paying for the work is getting what he wants. A scriptwriter is ultimately writing something that is validated by someone else wanting to collaborate with that expressed vision. That collaboration may take the form of money invested by a backer or a producer. It may take the form of creative consent invested by a director or an actor. It may take the form of client consent to proceed with the vision.

It is difficult to characterize a concept because it has no fixed length, no fixed form. It just has to convince, persuade, and embody the seed of the script to come. Generally, the concept can be stated in a paragraph or a page at the most, depending on the length of the program. It is important for the writer to get reactions and for the producer to give reactions before significant effort goes into the next stage, the treatment. A concept for our anti-smoking PSA might look like this.

### *A Concept for a PSA: Smoked to Death*

A young, attractive couple, at the end of a date, sit in a kitchen. As they light up, he offers her a beer from the fridge. The young man, a kind of Johnny Depp character, seems to hallucinate when he opens the fridge door and finds himself in a morgue.

Our images suggest that the reality of smoking-related disease is hidden from the smoker's consciousness as the contemporary mannerisms of a hip lifestyle distract the audience. By means of stunning special effects and clever cutting, we get the audience involved in the story. The value of shock and a contemporary horror story technique allows us to show the unsuspecting youth audience the reality of the consequences of smoking. The audience sees the young man's hallucination of seeing the inside of his date's lungs and a vision of her morphing into a sick older woman ravaged by the effects of smoking-related disease.

## Pitching

Most beginning writers don't know about pitching. Pitching is talking, not writing. It is part of the communicating and selling of ideas in the entertainment and communication industries. You have to talk your ideas as well as write them down. To make a living as a writer, you often have to sell your ideas in meetings. It is a notorious part of the entertainment business that decisions to develop projects are often based on short pitches. The art of pitching is difficult to master. The Robert Altman movie, *The Player* (1992), contains a number of scenes of pitching story ideas to producers and studio executives. It gives viewers a good idea of how pitching works in the entertainment business.

Pitching is not restricted to entertainment writing. When you write for a corporate client or a producer of corporate programs, you spend a lot of time in meetings and briefings in which you have to present your ideas succinctly and clearly to win the job. Even though the concept has been written down, you usually have to present it verbally in a meeting with the client. A good pitch should capture the essential idea in a nutshell and tease the listeners so that they are motivated to read what you have written. You should never read your concept to the client because then when the client reads it, he experiences an anticlimax. This is because there is nothing new. Thinking on your feet and communicating ideas orally is part of the writing business whether in entertainment or corporate communications.

## Treatment

After the concept comes the treatment. Both of these terms are universally used and understood. A writer must know what they are and how to write them. Writing the treatment involves expanding the concept to reveal the complete structure of

the program with the basic content or storyline arranged in the order that will prevail in the final script. A treatment is about structure and the arrangement of scenes. The narrative order must be clear. All the principal characters should be introduced. Although this document is still written in normal prose, it frequently introduces key moments of voice narration or dramatic dialogue. Some writers base the treatment on a scene outline. In television series, the scene outline is known as a beat sheet and can substitute for a treatment. A treatment is always written in the present tense—always.

#### *A Treatment for a PSA: Smoked to Death*

Interior kitchen, a young man has lit up a cigarette with his girlfriend. He offers her a beer. He goes to the fridge and opens the door. Suddenly, he finds himself opening the door of body refrigerator in the interior of a morgue. A white-coated assistant pulls out a drawer from the freezer. Back to the kitchen. He is visibly shaken, dismisses it, opens the beer for himself and her, hands his attractive date the beer.

Putting on a grin, he starts to make seductive small talk. We see her inhale and, as the camera pulls back, a special effect reveals the inside of her lungs like an X-ray. Cut to his worried look. Zoom in. Zoom out to the same woman morphing into a much older woman with wrinkles brought on by smoking and a cough. His face registers alarm. The next vision is of the girl morphed into an older woman with emphysema in a hospital bed, on oxygen. The couple in the kitchen clink beer bottles. His line: "Your health."

We cut to a cemetery then a quick track to a headstone. Close-up of inscription: "Died from Smoking-Related Disease." Cut to another headstone showing the same inscription: "Died from Smoking-Related Disease." And another and another in more rapid succession. In the kitchen, she puts out her cigarette and coughs once. Cut to text: "Smoking kills 450,000 Americans every year!"

## First Draft Script

The name of this document is fairly self-explanatory. The first draft script is the initial attempt to transpose the content of the treatment into a screenplay or script format appropriate to the medium. This is the crossover from prose writing to scriptwriting in which all the special conventions of camera and scene description are used. The layout of the page serves the special job of communicating action, camera angles, and audio to a production team. It is the idea of the program formulated as a blueprint for production. The producer, the client, and the director get their first chance to read a total account for every scene from beginning to end. Until now the program idea has existed incompletely as a promise of things to come. Now it has to work in every scene with little or nothing left to chance for actors, directors, and anyone involved with production.

## A First Draft Script for a PSA: Smoked to Death

<p>1. INT. KITCHEN-NIGHT</p> <p>Establishing shot of a young, attractive couple in a sitcom sort of kitchen. The young man is a Johnny Depp type. The girl is Angelina Jolie. The style is contemporary. They light up. She nods to accept the beer. The man turns to open the fridge door.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">CUT TO</p>	<p>MAN: Beer?</p>
<p>2. INT. MORGUE-NIGHT</p> <p>The young man finds himself opening the door to a body refrigerator. A white-coated assistant pulls out a corpse.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">CUT TO</p>	<p>FADE UP ATMOSPHERIC MUSIC FADE OUT MUSIC</p>
<p>3. INT. KITCHEN-NIGHT</p> <p>The man turns back with the beers. He is visibly shaken. Cut to the girl who raises an eyebrow. He recovers and smiles and hands her the beer. He is about to launch into some suave small talk when he reacts again to something we haven't seen.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">CUT TO</p>	

*continued*

<p>4. SPECIAL EFFECT</p> <p>We see the girl inhale, but as if by X-ray vision, so that the inside of her tobacco polluted lungs are seen inside out. ZOOM IN. Cut to her smiling mouth blowing smoke.</p>	
<p>5. INT. KITCHEN-NIGHT</p> <p>He is disturbed once again at this horrific hallucination. The girl is back to normal. She is chattering away.</p>	<p>FADE IN MUSIC</p> <p>FADE OUT MUSIC</p>
<p>6. SPECIAL EFFECT</p> <p>As we watch her, her face starts to wrinkle showing the aging effects of smoking.</p>	<p>MUSIC</p>
<p>7. INT. HOSPITAL-DAY</p> <p>We see an older woman recognizable as the pretty young girl. She is older. She is suffering from emphysema and on oxygen and breathing with difficulty.</p>	<p>MUSIC</p> <p>FADE MUSIC UNDER</p>
<p>8. INT. KITCHEN-DAY</p> <p>The couple clink beer bottles.</p>	<p>BOTH TOGETHER: Your health!</p>
<p>9. EXT.CEMETERY-DAY</p> <p>Quick track to a headstone. CU of inscription: DIED FROM SMOKING-RELATED DISEASE. CUT TO another headstone with the same inscription. And another and</p>	<p>FADE UP MUSIC</p>

*continued*

another in rapid succession. PULL BACK to see a whole cemetery full of headstones like a military graveyard.	
10. INT. KITCHEN-DAY  The girl puts out her cigarette in an ashtray and coughs once and smiles. FREEZE.	
11. CG  Text SUPERS over the freeze frame: "Smoking kills 450,000 Americans every year! Do you want to become a statistic?" Sponsoring Organization Name	MUSIC FADES OUT

## Voice Narration and Dialogue

One of the particular skills that a writer needs to bring to the writing of a script is the ability to write dialogue and voice narration. The obvious point is that language written to be read on the printed page has a subtly different ring to it than language meant to be spoken sound on an audio track. Whereas spoken language in a voice-over commentary works better in short sentences that are readily understood, in printed media, longer and more complex sentences can have value. Printed sentences can be reread, but spoken language on the sound track of a program must communicate effectively right away.

Spoken language is often more colloquial than written language, which is usually more formal. Spoken language allows contractions, shortcuts and even sentence fragments that are inappropriate in print. This is particularly true of dialogue. If you are creating a character, the lines that character speaks must be credible and plausible. A rap artist does not talk like a senator. A construction worker doesn't talk like a college professor. Whatever kind of character is on screen, his or her dialogue should come across as natural and believable.

One of the principles of oratory that goes back to classical treatises on rhetoric by the Greek philosopher Aristotle and the Roman senator Cicero is decorum. The language must be appropriate to the occasion, the person, and the subject matter. Not all spoken language is casual and colloquial. Great moments in history have been marked by spoken language. Every American student has been referred to

Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address as an example of a clear, eloquent, and succinct statement. It was written to be spoken. Yet it is formal, stylized, and not at all colloquial. It has decorum. It uses language appropriate to the time, place, and occasion. In a sense, the writing of commentary and dialogue simply observes the rules of classical rhetoric. In our time, we have lost sight of the origins of wisdom and knowledge about how to use language appropriately and effectively.

Whatever you write for the sound track, whether dialogue or commentary, you should always test it out by reading it aloud, or better still, by asking someone else to read it back to you. Wildlife documentaries are particularly prone to bad commentaries. They are frequently intrusive, cute, or, worse still, monotonous.

Language destined for the sound track should

- Be clear
- Complement the image
- Match the character or subject matter
- Be pronounceable or speakable
- Be suitable for the target audience.

## Revision

Every stage of the scriptwriting process involves readers and critics. Most writers are paid to write by a producer or corporate client who is entitled to ask for changes at each stage of the process. This is normal and proper. The writer's skill in conceiving visual sequences is a valued skill. It requires a lot of work and a special talent. Although writers write their own scripts on *spec* (without being commissioned), eventually any script has to be read and understood by an enabler such as a producer, a director, or an actor. Anyone who is going to lend energy or resources to bring a script into production has views and will want to modify the script in some way. This means revision.

Revision is the hardest part of a writer's job because it means being self-critical. It means throwing out ideas or changing them after you have invested time and energy to make them work. Sometimes you have to give up ideas you believe in. You have to trust that the process will work out in the long run. If you cannot prevail in vigorous debate at a meeting and get all your ideas accepted, you have to accommodate alternatives. Willingness to revise and the capacity to make revisions mark the most successful and professional writers. You have to learn to see revision as an opportunity to make your work better. You have to develop a thick skin. If you are oversensitive to criticism, you will have a hard time. You must learn to see writing as a collaboration and to see your writing as a creative service rather than personal property.

There are different levels of revision. Revision does not mean correcting spelling or grammar. This should be corrected before submission. It means throwing out

unnecessary material. It means adding new scenes. It means changing the order of scenes. In an extreme case, it could mean abandoning a concept and starting again. However, the custom and practice in this industry, which is reflected in contracts, allows you to demand more money for rewriting something that had been accepted at an earlier stage. You can see the need for these stages of the process that have developed over the years. People change their minds. By submitting work in stages, you gain acceptance for your work before you invest time and energy in the next stage, knowing that each stage is more laborious. If your client or producer demands something that overturns a previously accepted stage of the process, you should be paid to do the work again. This is unusual, but it does happen. In the entertainment industry, this often means paying off one writer and bringing in another. The stages of the process are important to the success of the scriptwriting enterprise because they support the creative development of ideas in a methodical way, and they provide a comprehensible system for the business arrangement that accompanies writing work.

## Final Draft

The final draft is another self-explanatory term. It is the final document that incorporates all the revisions and input of the client or producer, and all the improvements and finishing touches that a writer gives to the writing job even when not explicitly asked for. Scriptwriters, like all writers, look at their work with a critical eye and seek constant improvement. This document should mark the end of the writer's task and the completion of any contractual arrangement.

## Shooting Script

You have probably heard the term shooting script. What is the difference between a script and a shooting script? The simplest way to distinguish them is to say that the scriptwriter writes the script and the director writes the shooting script. The difference is that the shooting script translates the script into a production document concerned with detailed camera angles usually based on location surveys. It breaks down the script into shots and camera setups. It represents the director's technical conception of how to shoot the program. A scriptwriter cannot write a shooting script unless that writer is also the director.

## Conclusion

What we have learned up to now is that scriptwriting is a process. It has stages. Scripts have special formats and use a technical shorthand for many descriptive

tasks. This kind of writing is unique to the new media that evolved throughout the twentieth century. It requires visual writing.

We know what a script looks like. We know the professional terminology of sight and sound. We know most of the theory. We have alluded to many different types of visual media. We have defined the problem of describing a moving picture medium in words on a page and shown how a scriptwriting convention has evolved to solve many of those problems. We now need to apply this knowledge to some of the more common media formats that we encounter in the world. To do this, we should look at specific communication problems that require scripted solutions. We need to apply what we have learned to the creation of a script. We need to find a method for undertaking the process.

## Exercises

1. Record or listen to a conversation in a cafeteria or a bus and transcribe it. Rewrite it to remove all the chaff and incoherence.
2. Take a piece of written prose and edit it for commentary.
3. Listen to a documentary sound track without looking at the picture. Watch a documentary without the sound track. Write an evaluation of the program structure based on each.
4. Conduct an interview of people you know to collect information for a piece on a controversy such as stem cell research, abortion, or gay marriage. Use an audio recorder or a camera.
5. Ask another writer to critique your work and write down that writer's comments. See if you can revise your script to take the criticisms into consideration.
6. Write a critique of a treatment or a script written by someone else.
7. Write a concept, treatment, and first draft script for a PSA on smoking, drinking, or domestic violence.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>William Goldman, *Adventures in the Screen Trade* (New York: Warner Books, 1984).

<sup>2</sup>See <http://us.imdb.com/Title?0098769>.

<sup>3</sup>Look up a photo archive such Getty Images at <http://gettyimages.com>.

<sup>4</sup>Statistical Abstract of the United States, published annually by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, Bureau of the Census. Figures for 1990 are documented in *Substance Abuse: The Nation's Number One Health Problem*, prepared by the Institute for Health Policy, Brandeis

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University for The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Princeton, NJ, October, 1993. Alcohol-related deaths are also documented.

<sup>5</sup>A total of 47,072 U.S. servicemen were killed in combat in Vietnam. This and other facts about the conflict can be found on the PBS web site, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/>

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## A Seven-Step Method for Developing a Creative Concept

# 4

Knowing how to describe visuals, sound, and action so that a production team can understand your intentions is the essential task of a scriptwriter. However, knowing this does not help you come up with a program idea or construct a script. How scripts get started is often a mystery to the beginner. One thing is certain. You do not just start describing scenes and write a first draft script. That is a recipe for failure. Scriptwriting is preceded by a great deal of thinking. It is probably true to say that writers in the media business are paid to think as much as to write. Once you have done the right thinking, the writing follows as night follows day. We now outline the steps needed to develop a creative concept. A strong creative concept is the foundation of successful scriptwriting.

The visual media of the twenty-first century are sophisticated communications tools. From their roots in photography and film, they continue to evolve in electronic form with dazzling innovations. To succeed in writing for these media, we need to see how the choice of the medium and its application result from a thinking process. It is the quality of this thinking process that determines the quality of the writing and the effectiveness of the communication. This is the meta-writing that we introduced in Chapter 1: writing that is not the finished document, but the writing you do below, or behind, the actual writing. This is the part of the iceberg that is unseen below the surface. If you watch a film or video, or even if you read a script, you do not see all of the analytic and conceptual thinking on which it is based.

Let's start with an axiom. An axiom is an undisputed given from which argument or investigation can proceed. Our axiom states that every program is a response to a communication problem. If there were no need to show, tell, explain, attract, entertain, seduce, delight, or distract an audience, there would be no reason to

make a program and, therefore, no need to write a script. Common sense tells us that any program addresses and solves some kind of communication need. Before we can start any job, we have to identify and define this particular communications need. Going through this analysis is not only essential but highly creative. Moreover, it is a method that will always prepare you for any writing job. As you learn your scriptwriting craft, follow the seven-step process described in this chapter. When you are experienced and a proven producer of scripts, you can adopt your own way of defining a solution to a communications problem.

## Step 1: Define the Communication Problem

Most of this method is logic and common sense. The shorthand question to answer is “What need?” Sometimes, you will come across the term “needs analysis,” referring to the investigation that discovers a communication problem. Basic communication means that someone (a person or corporate entity) expresses a thought, idea, or message that is delivered via some kind of medium—speech, print, video, interactive multimedia—to a receiver. The message can be designed and sent but not necessarily received, or if received, not necessarily understood. We all experience unsuccessful communication both as senders and receivers. Talking or writing to your friends, parents, or strangers, although it could be important, is easy to do and doesn’t cost you anything except, perhaps, for a telephone call or a postage stamp. Creating, sending, and receiving a PSA, a corporate PR video, or a training video is a very expensive exercise. Doing it haphazardly or improvising as you go is too risky. Professionals have developed ways of tipping the odds in favor of success by careful analysis and thought about the nature of the communication problem that is the reason for making a program.

Defining the communication need or problem is the first step. Collaboration is needed between the scriptwriter and the producer, or between the writer and a client. Very often you write for others, not for personal expression or for artistic reasons, but to help them communicate successfully. Until you know what the communication problem is, you cannot begin. Until writer and client define it and both agree what it is, the enterprise is fraught with hazard. You risk misunderstanding, multiple revisions, wasted money, and, finally, an unsuccessful result. The seven-step method discussed here is particularly successful for commissioned scriptwriting.

Think of it this way! Unless you can identify an audience that needs to know, understand, or perceive something that you, the communicator, want them to grasp, there is no basis for a script or a program. Simply put, you do not know what to say, to whom, or why you should demand an audience’s attention. Too often, corporate clients decide to make a video or create a web site without thinking through what precise problem it will solve. It is very important to grasp this basic point: that you must think for your client because your client may not have thought through the

problem. A client can ask an architect to design a bad building without realizing it. A client can ask a producer to produce a bad video without knowing. Architects can design buildings that do not solve the problem that led to the need for the building, and producers can make videos that do not solve the communications problem.

Let us illustrate this with some examples. First, we will go through the analysis of the communication problem so as to define the media need. Then we will see how to write it down in an acceptable and convincing way. Such a document is an intelligent form of insurance for the writer as well as being a service to the producer or client.

## Ivy College: An Admissions Video

Most college students have seen a video made by a college or university to recruit students. There must be hundreds of them. Now there are CD-ROMs and web sites that provide an interactive opportunity for the prospective students to get information. Because you can identify strongly with this particular audience, put yourselves in the recruitment video creator's shoes and think about the communications problem for the academic institution. What is it? The institution has to think about the needs of the student. What information will satisfy the high school senior's need for facts about courses, curricula, dorm life, the campus environment, sports, and recreational facilities? Is it just a need for information? Doesn't the institution want to project itself to a certain kind of student, to differentiate itself from other institutions? Does it want any student at any price? Is there something special about the institution and its traditions? What role should the video play in the whole process of recruitment that involves print media, applications, phone calls, campus visits, and counseling?

How can we define the communications problem? The students who might want to apply to Ivy College don't know enough about the institution to enable them to make a decision to apply, or perhaps to make an inquiry about applying. They might not know where it is, what it looks like, what the courses are like, what the other students are like, whether it matches a special interest or requirement. They might not know that Ivy College has a strong program in, say, marine biology. They might not know things the college wants them to know, or they might want to know things that the college doesn't want them to know.

The question then arises, "What is the objective of the video?" After your audience has seen it, what do you want the result to be? Very quickly we find three questions in play that are closely interrelated: (1) What is the nature of the communication problem you want to solve? (2) Who is your audience? and, (3) How can you define the successful outcome of that communication, namely, the objective?

Now that several issues are on the table, you have to be able to state clearly what each one is. This means being able to write them down for someone else to read and evaluate. The beginning scriptwriter is typically impatient and wants to get

started on the actual writing, and thus may be tempted to brush off the questions that this chapter addresses. Whatever you do, resist the temptation to shortcut the analytic thinking that precedes writing. At the outset of a scriptwriting job, all is promise, all is possible, and you have a great deal of freedom to invent. With each step, the script becomes more and more concrete, more and more specific, and has to deliver on the easy promises of the concept you put forward at the beginning. These analytic steps ensure that you stay brief and on target.

## American Express: American Travel in Europe

American Express has an interest in the success of European hotels and restaurants that accept its card. American Express is sometimes perceived as an agent taking a percentage of revenue rather than as a contributor to the travel and tourism industry. Its market research indicates that the pattern of American tourism is changing and that the European tourist industry is in danger of losing its market share.

What is the communications problem? It is complex. First, there is a need to communicate information. The client knows something the audience doesn't know. If we tell that audience what we know, they will see a business problem in a different light. They will also change their perception of the client from a passive intermediary to a contributor and a partner. So the second communications problem is to shift perception or attitude. You will be able to measure the success or failure of the speech, publication, or video by the transfer of information and by the change of attitude.

The next issue: who is the audience and what is their current mentality? Unless you can answer these questions, you cannot ever design a successful communication. Even when you answer the question of who the audience is, you still don't know what the content should be, nor how you will persuade them to see your point of view. If you define your communication problem clearly, at least you can start thinking about the other problems with some hope of success.

In this case, the target audience is European travel professionals such as hotel management staff, restaurateurs, and tourist authorities (but not the general public). Research shows that this audience is somewhat complacent. They think the tourists will keep coming because it is a law of nature, like the migration of elk across the tundra. They are ignorant of American trends and tastes and unaware of competitive destinations. (See complete script on the DVD.)

Let's look at another communications problem.



## PSA for Battered Women

A shelter, also an advisory service for battered women, wants to make a PSA to reach women who need a refuge from abuse. This is a real challenge to think through.

You may think it is obvious. Your target audience is battered women. You just tell them about the safe house and where it is. However, there are a dozen different messages that serve different communications needs. Some are purely informational: where is it? what is the phone number? There are women victims who don't know about it. Your PSA tells them. Communication problem solved! Job done!

But there are also women who are abused who don't think of their treatment as abuse. They are in denial, as the current psychological language describes it. Some are in real physical danger. Others may be sliding into a pattern that will lead to abuse. Some have children; some don't. Some are educated; some aren't. Some are afraid and confused; some are aware of the abuse but powerless to overcome their problems.

Suddenly, we realize that a good PSA for one type of battered woman would be a bad PSA for another. A meaningful message for one would be of no interest to another. The communication problem has to be defined very closely to accomplish a meaningful objective. One problem might be informational; another might be motivational. You have to get your audience to think and go on thinking. Another problem you might want to solve could be defined by behavior—you want your audience to pick up the phone and call the number you publicize in the PSA.

You have almost certainly seen PSAs that address the issues of drugs, smoking, or prejudice. All of them involve quite complex decisions about what communication problem is in play. What is certain is that the problem varies with the target audience. Hence, the objective varies with both. It is like an equation in algebra. If you change the value of one unknown, you get a different answer.

## Shell Gas International

An oil company has invented a process that can turn natural gas into lubrication oils at an economical cost. Huge reserves of natural gas exist in both developed and undeveloped countries that are practically worthless because there is no nearby market for the gas. However, there is a market for lubrication products because they have higher value and can be delivered to market at less cost. The decision to buy the process, make the investment, and enter into a joint venture would be made by a handful of people in the world—oil ministers and senior geologists or advisors. The countries involved number about a dozen.

The target audience for this video is going to be about 25 people, 50 at most. Contrast that with the audience for a college recruitment video, or an exercise video that shows you how to get “buns of steel.” How different are the communication problems! How different are the target audiences! How different are the objectives of each video! Until you define the answers to the key questions, you don't stand a chance of writing a successful script. Your interest may be in writing for entertainment media. Although the problems are slightly different, you still

need to be able to answer a variant of the same questions. For instance, you need to know who your primary audience is—children, thirty-somethings, women, or youth. Your objective could be to make them laugh or cry. You might intend to write drama, comedy, or documentary. For television you might be writing a game show or a children's adventure or an animated cartoon. All of these have different premises and, therefore, demand different thinking.

In summary, defining a communication problem is a “needs” analysis of a communication deficiency of some kind. Somebody or some group needs to know something that they don't know. Having established what it is, you follow the steps to find a media solution that will tell them what they need to know. Ask yourself why the program should be made. It must solve a communication problem that you must identify clearly. Sometimes, people confuse the communication problem with another larger problem that lies behind the immediate reason for making the program. This could be a social problem or a marketing problem, which is the reason for the need for communication. However, the communication problem is not the social problem. For example, smoking is a public health problem. The objective of public policy is to stop people, especially young people, from getting addicted to nicotine. The communication problem, however, is not to stop people smoking. It is to change attitude or motivate change.

An anti-smoking PSA might address a specific communication problem, which is that teenage smokers are unaware or dismissive of the health hazard of smoking. They've heard it all before. They dismiss the warnings and believe they are immortal. Getting through this specific problem of denial is the communication problem. Behind it lies a larger social and public health problem: persuading teenagers to stop smoking, or not to start in the first place. Beginners often and easily confuse the marketing problem or the social problem with the communication problem. Someone who says the communication problem is the need to show that drinking and driving do not go together is stating an objective, not a problem—not stating the problem but the solution.

Take another topic! What is the communication problem that lies behind a college recruitment video? Someone who says, “The communication problem is to show high school students, mostly seniors, how to apply to college through a video,” has not found the problem. The problem is better stated by asking, “What do those who are unsure about the application process to apply to college need to know in order to apply successfully?” Or, “Many high school students are insecure about the college application process and do not know how to go about applying.” That states a problem for which there is a media solution.

You can see that several different PSAs could be made from the same generalized premise in each case. So, to get off on the right foot, it is really important to nail this question accurately. Smoking is a social problem or a health problem; domestic abuse is a social problem; college recruitment is a marketing problem. But within these, there are communication problems that will be specific to the programs,

will define your PSA and lead to clear ideas about the target audience and the objective.

## Step 2: Define the Target Audience

The shorthand question to answer is, “To whom?” From the previous examples, you can see it is impossible to talk about any communication problem without bumping into the question of who is the target audience. If you change the audience, you change the kind of problem, and hence, the objective. If you want to warn smokers of the dangers of smoking, you will write a completely different script if you are addressing adolescents or high school students compared to adults or veteran smokers. Getting someone to stop a 20-year-old habit is a different communication task than discouraging a young person from starting. Selling a process to turn natural gas into lubrication oils will never have the customer of those oils as its audience. Its audience is decision makers who will give a green light to the investment of hundreds of millions of dollars. If you do not accurately profile your audience, you will endanger your communication.

To illustrate how much the target audience changes the communication problem and the objective, let’s play with the variables. The message is, “I love you.” You have had an argument with your boyfriend or girlfriend. You want to make up. Suddenly, the message takes on a different weight. How you will communicate suddenly becomes very important. Sincerity is crucial. But some kinds of sincerity are better than others. How the message is delivered is critical.

Try another variation. The target audience for your “I love you” message is your mother on Mother’s Day, or your grandmother on her ninetieth birthday. Does that color the problem differently and suggest a completely different objective? Or, your audience is someone to whom you are expressing this feeling for the first time. You have never uttered these words to this person before. Does that feel different? You get the point. Every time you vary the target audience, you change the communication problem and the kind of strategy that is going to make it succeed.

Take the Ivy College recruitment video discussed earlier. What if your target audience is nontraditional or returning students? What if your video is for a graduate program? Consider an extreme case. What if your audience is openly hostile? A company takes over another company and intends to rationalize the operation leading to layoffs, relocation, and changes in job titles. You are not going to construct the same video as if you were addressing company personnel about pensions or safety issues in the workplace. You have to address the deep distrust the audience will bring to the company’s message. In general, awareness of what the audience thinks, feels, knows, understands, does for a living, does for recreation, and so on could change everything. Their educational level, income, gender, age, married status, political views, or consumer preferences could flip your approach one way or the other.

Most beginners tend to be too vague about their target audience. Here's an example of a student attempt at defining the audience for a college admissions video:

My target audience consists of males and females who are interested in attending a small, diverse college in a town on the outskirts of Boston that offers a wide variety of majors.

This is too vague and mixes the statement up with objectives about "majors." In fact, some of the audience might not know they are interested in a small college or in the geographical location. The point is that we want to define who they are. Male and female is clear. They must be high school seniors or graduates. Are they all American, or are there also international students? Income might be a factor for private college tuition. Location is part of the content or the strategy of persuasion rather than a definition of the identity of the audience.

There are two words you need to know about that refer to techniques of measuring and identifying the character of audiences. They are *demographics* and *psychographics*. For most scriptwriting, you need to think about both.

## Demographics

Trying to identify the common characteristics of a group of people so that you can define them as a target audience is a professional preoccupation of advertisers, public relations practitioners, pollsters, marketers, television ratings researchers, and more. Millions of dollars are spent on audience research and market research to identify the profile of a buyer or a viewer. Just because you don't have a large budget to commission such research does not mean you can ignore demographics when you try to define who your audience is. You can, and should, do some amateur demographics. A lot of it is common sense.

Let's put down the major characteristics that delimit the nature of a person and categorize him or her as part of one grouping or another.

### *Age*

Age will affect the vocabulary you can use and the sort of devices that will work. You would not use a stuffed animal or a dinosaur character to explain company pensions, but you might use them to warn young children about the dangers of crossing the road. The college admissions video has a fairly well-defined target age. Many other projects do not have well-defined age targets.

### *Gender*

If you could identify a majority female audience, you might opt for a different approach than if it were a majority male audience. You can see this in TV advertising

for products with a gender bias such as shampoos, hygiene products, or perfume. A PSA targeting battered women is easier to write because the gender of the target audience is more likely to be women. However, you could write a PSA targeted at male abusers also, trying to increase awareness of destructive behavior. The approach would have to be entirely different. Yet again, women also abuse men although it is less well known. This would entail a complete rethink of the way to approach the PSA message.

### *Race and Ethnic Origin*

The sociology of race and ethnic origins tells us that groups have identities. There are common cultural assumptions and values that might aid or hinder communicating with these groups. The United States is home to numerous subcultures that might respond differently to certain nuances in language, music or style. A good example is the campaign by the Milk Marketing Board with the well-known tag line, "Got milk?" Translate this into Spanish and you get, "Are you lactating?" If your audience is international, the possibilities for cross-cultural misunderstanding are considerable. The most obvious way this could affect your message design is in casting. You might want the actors in your production to be representative of a minority group. A recent TV recruitment commercial for the U.S. Army showed a young African American youth with his mother. He says that it is time for him to be the man now. Interestingly, this ad implies that we are seeing a stereotyped single parent family presumed to be prevalent in this demographic. Moreover, the ad is clearly pitched at a disadvantaged racial and economic demographic. The target is race.

Wal-Mart has started doing business in Germany. In the United States, people are more familiar with strangers than in Europe. The greeters who approach shoppers at the entrance to Wal-Mart (the smiley face) offended Germans who complained to management about being approached by strangers. American sales personnel and telephone marketers call you by your first name, which Europeans consider a breach of etiquette that is offensive. There are regional differences in the United States. This is often exploited in advertising food that is regional, for instance. A southern accent might sell the barbecued spare ribs or the sauce better than a Boston accent which might give the New England clam chowder an identity.

### *Education*

The educational level of an audience governs the vocabulary you can use, the general knowledge you can assume, and the kind of argument that will be readily understood. When writing a corporate video for Shell that is aimed at decision makers in petroleum-producing countries, you can assume a certain level of language and concept, but you have to know the difference between an audience of geologists and an audience of ministers or high-level civil servants who are not scientists. The larger the audience, the lower the educational denominator is likely to be until you reach a national average.

A pharmaceutical company making a video about a new cholesterol-lowering drug aimed at cardiologists has a very high educational demographic. If the video is aimed, however, at the eventual users of that same cholesterol-lowering drug, the demographics change. The patients who are likely to use the drug cuts across the educational demographic.

#### *Income*

Socioeconomic classes have been studied intensively by advertisers so that they can define their characteristics. You may have heard of the letter classifications that designate income, with “A” being those people with the highest disposable income. Income is usually associated with professional occupations. Wealth might correlate with a political bias toward conservative views.

In the final analysis, most audiences are defined by complex variables. Whatever you can do to narrow down the classification of your audience’s cultural preferences, disposable income, or cultural attitudes will help.

## Psychographics

A concern with psychographics means worrying about what is going through the mind of your target audience. So just as you can classify the social and cultural characteristics of a person, you can also identify attitudes and mental outlook or state of mind. A person’s attitude might overwhelm the demographics for certain messages. Most people are driven by emotions to a greater or lesser degree. How they feel governs how they act and how they respond. Visual media such as film, video, and television communicate emotionally. For one reason, they show the human face and figure with all the body language and nonverbal communication that people intuitively understand. They tell stories that invite emotional responses. They use visual images that signify emotions or engender strong emotional responses. An image of an explosion or a plane crash provokes awe, fear, and fascination. Think of an archive shot of a hydrogen bomb going off with its signature mushroom cloud, or the dark vortex of a tornado touching down. These images compel attention.

Think about the ways that audiences can be “turned off.” The very phrase is a metaphor. A knob or a button on a radio or television set or remote control gives the user the power to interrupt the transmission or switch to another channel. Even if you were strapped to a chair and left in front of a television with your eyelids taped open, your attention could wander or even switch off entirely. We all have a “turn off” function in the brain, and we have filters that screen out what we don’t want to hear.

Corporate television and video often play to captive audiences. Unless the program designers give thought to the psychographics, they will lose the audience because of the “turn-off” switch in their brains. A client once argued to me that his internal corporate audience of middle managers was paid to watch the program

we were making and rejected my imaginative ideas to motivate them. This person did not understand psychographics. Audience response involves passive assent at a minimum. A stronger posture would be neutral consent. Even more positive would be getting the audience to actively seek and participate in the experience of the program in a way that involves a level of enjoyment.

Students sometimes tell me that a certain subject is boring to write about. My reply is always that there are no boring subjects, only boring writers. As a scriptwriter, I believe, and you must believe, that there is always a way to reach an audience.

Safety is a huge problem that costs corporate America millions of dollars. Companies are strongly motivated to reduce insurance premiums and lost work days by communicating safe work practices. This subject probably sounds pretty boring to you, but if you are good, you can find a way to make the topic watchable. The point is not whether you would choose to view a safety video on how to use ladders at home on a Saturday night and invite your friends. Nevertheless, in the right context, at the right moment, many outwardly uninteresting subjects become relevant to what you need to know in your job, or in your life.

Video Arts is a company that has made millions out of videos on management training often written around a comic character played by John Cleese, the Monty Python actor. The videos are often funny and clever. The audience swallows the message with the comedy and remembers it. Delivered as a straight message, the audience might reject that which it willingly accepts when presented with humor. This is applied psychographics.

Emotions are complex, volatile, and difficult to categorize. For these reasons, psychographics is an art rather than a science. You don't have to be a psychologist or psychic to make use of psychographics in your writing. Once again, a great deal is common sense deduction. You can analyze your audience's psychographics by putting yourself in its shoes. You can investigate your own feelings and attitudes to extrapolate what is likely to be shared by another. You have to be self-aware and self-analytical. Your own strong preferences might not represent the masses. Your taste in music, whether it's Mozart or Motley Crüe, Handel or Heavy Metal, seems right to your ear, but it may turn off a large segment of your audience.

This, incidentally, makes it very difficult to choose music for a sound track. Surprising successes can result from daring choices. *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Stanley Kubrik's classic film, made a huge audience listen to and appreciate a modern classical composer, Richard Strauss. This mass audience probably didn't know the name of the composer or the name of the composition, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, or that it was played by the Berlin Philharmonic conducted by Herbert Von Karajan, but they responded to the music. Now most people instantly recognize the theme. The theme was imitated and copied and jazzed up and played on different instruments. It was hummed by millions. Another example was the huge jump in sales of a Mozart piano concerto (No. 21, C major, K. 467) whose slow movement was used in the sound track of a Danish film, *Elvira Madigan*. People who would normally



never listen to or buy a recording of Mozart were sending this record off the charts because the director made them experience the lyrical and romantic feeling of the music. All this is to remind you that you have to use intuition. Sometimes you have to go beyond the obvious, the conventional, and the predictable to tap into the receptivity of an audience.

What are the main psychological issues that make up a person's mind? They are things you know about already.

### *Emotion*

We all have moods and sensations that are colored by emotions that range from down or depressed, sad and anxious to happy, elated, playful and wild. Individuals have emotions; groups have emotions; and crowds react with emotions. Most rock concerts are exercises in crowd mood creation. Emotions are tricky and volatile, especially when crowds are involved. An audience is sometimes a crowd and sometimes a large number of individuals in a serial response to a program. Think of a book that has sold a million copies. The audience is large, but each one of that million encountered the book individually. They do not all gather in a stadium for a mass reading, whereas the audience for a movie made from the book is a different entity. Groups of hundreds of people sit together and experience the same moments together, perhaps laugh together or cry together. Even a television audience is a simultaneous mass audience of single viewers or small groups of viewers.

As a scriptwriter you have to deal with emotions, with the anticipated emotional response of your audience. It is almost always important to communicate emotionally to an audience in the visual media as well as by reason and logic. The mixture varies with the nature of the communication. Dramatic narrative tends to work through emotional communication, whereas documentary or training videos lean on logical argument. Getting battered women to use a shelter probably requires reaching the audience through emotion rather than reason. The selling of Shell's natural gas conversion process, in contrast, should be based primarily on logic and rational exposition.

### *Attitude*

An audience frequently has an attitude, not in the slang sense of the word, which corrupts the original meaning, but in the sense that their disposition can be characterized by it. Think of these different audiences.

After the Rodney King beating by four Los Angeles police officers, you have to write a police PR video about police and community relations in the inner city. Simply put, your audience is going to be hostile. You cannot make a move without dealing with the open distrust and skepticism that will block their hearing what you want to convey.

You have to write an internal PR script for a company that has taken over another company, to explain the benefits of the merger to the employees. People are fearful

of losing their jobs, their seniority, or their pensions. You cannot proceed without taking into account the attitude of this audience.

The opposite condition can arise. Audiences can be receptive as well as hostile. You are writing a recruiting video for an elite volunteer military unit such as the Marine Corps or the Green Berets. You are probably preaching to the converted. If they are watching, it's because they are already thinking about joining up. You don't have to break down mistrust, skepticism, or hostility. You do not design the message to turn pacifists into warriors.

Yet other audiences are neutral or indifferent. They do not bring strong negative or strong positive predisposition to the table. You have to wake them up or arouse interest or curiosity by your images and your creative ideas. It seems constructive for a scriptwriter to think carefully about whether his audience falls into one or other of these categories—receptive, hostile, or indifferent.

#### *Attention Span*

How long does it take you to change the TV channel if something doesn't catch your interest? You've been pampered all your life by a multitude of choices. You are merciless. If you don't like something, you change it. You switch to another channel, or you switch off the TV. Now you are on the other side of the game. You have to hold your audience by the pacing, content, and imagination of your script. They have the remote control. Andy Warhol, the controversial American artist, made an 8-hour film of one of his favorite stars sleeping. Needless to say, it did not have a large box office. It was a rebellious stunt by an outrageous artist.

Think about how network news programs try to keep you interested with little previews and announcements about what's up next. They use good-looking anchors who smile at you through the lens and seduce you into staying with them. How many times do you hear the line, "Don't go away?"

#### *Information Overload*

In our day and age, the amount of information presented to us through print media, radio, TV, and now the Internet is overwhelming—and that is before you consider deeper levels of information that you can search out in books, libraries, or archives or on the internet. We all have to limit our intake in order to process it. Thinking about the rate at which an audience can absorb information is important.

You will hear the terms target audience and primary audience, secondary, even tertiary audience. What do they mean? Even with the exhaustive research that advertisers do to market products, a certain averaging of characteristics is necessary. Dominant factors have to govern your approach. We all quote Lincoln's phrase about not being able to please all of the people, all of the time. You can, however, please some of the people some of the time. How many can be included is the writer's challenge. You make your judgment and hope that you bracket the largest and most important part of your audience. The others are called the secondary audience. You want them, but you are not going to jeopardize gaining the

larger audience to get them. You know that you might lose some of the secondary audience, but the success of your communication does not depend on them.

The best way to test yourself is to ask whether you can describe that audience profile. Can you say who is not part of that audience? Can you carry your defined audience through the program? Can you connect it to the communication problem? You are now answering the question “to whom?” So now you’ve got a shorthand guide—what for? And to whom? Next we need to answer the question “why?” Answering “why?” means you can define the objective for the video or program.

### Step 3: Define the Objective

The communication objective is closely associated with the communication problem. One states the problem; the other states the outcome. So if teenagers do not appreciate or understand the health hazards of smoking, which is the problem, the objective is to change their perception of smoking. The shorthand questions to answer are “why?” and “what for?” In military terms, an objective would be to capture a position or to win the battle. The larger objective is always to win the war. The objective is usually pretty easy to see. The hard part is knowing how to do it. The same is true of scriptwriting. In business terms, an objective would be to achieve a 10 percent increase in sales or a 5 percent decrease in costs. These objectives are clear. The hard part is how to achieve them. Likewise with scriptwriting!

A TV program, film, or video must have an objective that is clear. It is the net result that you are working to achieve at the end of the viewing—the message. It is what the audience is left with as a general effect. A lot of programs are meant to entertain. That is too general. Entertainment can mean many things. Comedy is designed to make the audience laugh; drama, to make the audience worry; romance, to make the audience fantasize; horror, to make the audience fearful, and so on.

Many programs do not have an entertainment objective. The primary objective could be to impart information. That is not to say they are not watchable or entertaining. Lots of programs try to give you facts and figures about a product, about a country, about a health issue, about the history of the country, about the environment, or about the life of an animal species. You assimilate information from the program that you did not possess before watching the program. You may have had other experiences during the program, but taken as a whole, your main acquisition is that you know something or understand something you didn’t know or understand before. The objective was to convey information. What is the primary objective of your script concept? Information objectives appeal to the mind and to the reasoning side of the brain.

Another common way to design a visual communication is to think about shifting the audience’s attitude or point of view. Information might also be part of

the package, but the primary net result you desire is to get the audience to see things differently. For example, you can communicate a mountain of facts about the dangers of smoking—how many people die of smoking-related diseases, a list of the negative consequences of smoking. A thinking person might draw conclusions. Almost anyone can draw the conclusion that smoking involves a serious risk to health. Nevertheless, many such people will dismiss the communication and not change their thinking, let alone their behavior.

So facts and information alone won't work. We have to get the audience to acknowledge the facts and infer consequences for the individual's health. A nicotine addict has already been bombarded with facts. So try another approach! Make use of drama and imagination to get the audience watching! Let the audience draw its own conclusion. To recall our anti-smoking PSA from the previous chapter, the point of its approach was to turn facts and figures into graphic images that will disturb the audience.

How would you respond to such a PSA? Not with your head! The images bring your emotions into play. You are forced to see something commonplace in a smoker's daily life in a different context. If you are a smoker, you might be disturbed. You might start seeing your habit differently. Your attitude could shift. If the shift is strong enough, it could be described as motivating. Remember! The word "motivate" comes from the Latin root meaning "to move," and so does the word "emotion." If emotions are affected in a coherent and sequenced fashion, the result is motivation.

Most advertising depends on visual stimulation of the emotions to shift attitudes. This is sometimes known as the soft sell. The challenge is to create a sequence of images that compel the viewers to lead themselves to a position from which they cannot go back.

Apply this to more complex problems. You have to make a 15-minute video that communicates safe handling of materials in an industry or explains how to drive defensively. Or you have to make a 10-minute video that persuades the audience to recycle. In this communication problem, your objective is slightly different. The difference is that you not only want to motivate the audience, you also want to activate them. You want them to do something—to put their bottles and cans and plastics into receptacles for collection. This is the most demanding objective because you want to change their behavior. A lot of marketing videos (not TV commercials, as you will see in a later chapter) try to do just that. We have now defined an action objective, commonly called a behavioral objective.

Let's revisit our examples. The objective is to make high school teenagers think twice about getting addicted to nicotine. The objective is to make battered women seek counseling before they end up in a hospital with broken bones. The objective is to get European travel professionals to think about their tourist product for American tourists and whether it corresponds to what those customers are looking for. The objective is to get a high school graduate or senior to call admissions and ask for an application. And when you revisit the objective of a personal communication

(the “I love you” message), the objective is to get your estranged girlfriend to let bygones be bygones and come back to you.

In every case, you can make a definite and specific statement about the successful outcome of the communication. Until you can do that, you will never write a successful script to solve the communication problem because you haven’t thought about what you are trying to achieve.

We now have three clear steps down on paper. One defines the problem, another defines the audience, and the third defines the desired result or objective we are working toward. Answering these three questions does not finish the job because we haven’t answered the question “how?” How are we going to solve the communications problem, reach the audience, and achieve the objective?

### Step 4: Define the Strategy

The shorthand question to answer is, “how?” To write a successful script that solves the communication problem, we need to figure out how to achieve the objective, reach the target audience, and suggest the content that leads to effective communication. This is a moment of creative challenge. If you want an audience to think, feel, or act in a certain way, you have to have a strategy. The military commander plans to pound the enemy position with artillery, then divide his forces into two groups who will attack from different directions. A marketing executive has a plan to increase sales by offering an incentive such as a 2-for-1 sale or a free baseball glove with every full tank of gas. This is the “how.” How are you going to achieve your objective?

You can’t give frequent flyer miles to your audience for watching. So how can scriptwriters get the job done? They think up strategic ways to hold the attention of the audience while they deliver the message. For example, they use humor, a story, suspense, shock, intrigue, unique footage, a testimonial, or a case history. Everyone will listen to a joke. If the joke has a clever point, your audience will get the message while they laugh or chuckle.

Many ads use humor. A recent ad shows a dog and a man sitting in front of one another. The dog is training the man to balance a piece of cheese on his nose and on command flip it in the air and eat it. Reversing the roles of dog and man and having the dog talk captures people’s attention with a smile. You will remember that brand of dog food.

### Step 5: Define the Content

The shorthand version of defining the content is to ask the question, “what?” What are we going to see and hear on the screen? What is the program going to be about? What happens in the story or narrative of the program? Clearly, the content

cannot be defined first. You may well argue that you can define the communications problem, the target audience, and the objective in almost any order. However, they must all be defined before you can designate content. In fact, you really need to have some kind of strategy or creative device to make it all work before you fill in content.

Content is what you see. Content is what your program is about. It is the objective matter or substance of the piece. When a program is shot, the camera has to be placed in front of something to capture its image. The script has to describe what is going to be in front of the camera. How it serves the communication objective may not be apparent from shot to shot.

We can illustrate this by revisiting the several script ideas we have discussed throughout this chapter. In the college recruitment video, the content could be described by a list of the things we are going to shoot: classrooms and teachers, dorm life with students, sports and extracurricular activities. From this list, you can quickly see that content does not often define what is unique about a program. This list could cover hundreds of recruitment videos, if not all of them. What makes one different is the strategy and the creative concept. In the natural gas video, we have to show the process. In this case, we could shoot a pilot plant and show the process working. In the American Express video, the content is testimonials and shots of the type of tourist setting that market research shows appeals to American tourists.

## Step 6: Define the Appropriate Medium

The shorthand question to answer is, “which medium?” All media have particular qualities and peculiarities that give them strengths and weakness. What works for film on a large screen projected in a darkened room might not work on a 21-inch TV screen. The intimacy of the television image would not work on a 40-foot movie screen. Dense information that should be presented in the form of graphs works in a slide show but not on video. In short, the concept we devise has to work for the medium, or we have to pick the medium that will work for the concept. We have to write so as to exploit the special advantages and qualities of the medium.

Interviews work well on television and video. Action and long shots work better in film. Corporate clients frequently ask for communication objectives to be put into a video that clash with the medium. For instance, a detailed instruction about how to install a piece of equipment is better done in print. An audience is not able to take in written instructions on a TV screen. They won't remember them. In print, you can look at the page as long as you need to and refer back to it. If the communication has a long shelf life, an interactive CD-ROM would work better than linear video programming and possibly better than print. A small TV screen won't work at an exhibition or a trade show. You need something that commands attention visually. A video wall of 9 or 12 programmable TV screens does the job.

What makes a PSA for television different from a PSA for radio, for instance? A student wrote a PSA on domestic abuse that, although conceived for video, works successfully as a pure audio script. It is only secondarily a visual script. The creative idea is a sequence of spoken statements that compels an audience to think. The message is carried in the spoken voice-over more than in the images. Although it also works with visuals, the test is to take the images away and see if it works. A visual concept and visual writing relies on a sequence of visual images:

INT. BEDROOM DAY

CAMERA PANS ACROSS A SMALL BEDROOM,  
PAUSING BRIEFLY TO SHOW THE BROKEN  
GLASS AND SHATTERED TABLE STREWN  
ACROSS THE HARDWOOD FLOOR. BROKEN  
PICTURE FRAME HOLDING A PHOTO OF  
A MAN AND WOMAN KISSING.

CUT TO WINDOW WITH RAIN FALLING  
AGAINST THE GLASS.

MALE V.O.

A woman is beaten every  
fifteen seconds

PAN DOWN TO WOMAN SITTING ON THE  
FLOOR HOLDING HER KNEES TO HER  
CHEST, SHAKING.

FEMALE V.O.

Which means . . .  
. . . every minute,  
four  
women are beaten . . .  
. . . every hour 240  
women  
are beaten . . .  
. . . and every day 960  
women are beaten . . .  
. . . every week, 6,720  
women are beaten.

SUPER TEXT: HOTLINE 800 NUMBER.

MALE V.O.

What did you do last  
week?

Although the images have been visualized, you can hear this script. It relies heavily on the spoken commentary. You can easily imagine this as a successful radio commercial. We discussed visual narrative in Chapter 1. Visual ideas work best in a visual medium.

## Step 7: Create the Concept

This is the seventh step. You are thinking: “That’s enough. Let’s get started. I’ve done my homework.” Not yet! Before you take the seventh and final step, you should answer these questions in writing so that they are crystal clear. You may get impatient with this method and resist going through this analytic prewriting process. Rest assured that any problem that shows up in your script concept will be traceable to these issues. The most important realization that you can have at this point is that addressing these six issues will enable you to generate creative ideas. Now the hidden process of writing comes out into the light. The meta-writing begins, writing which will dissolve into the final production document.

Before we go to the final step, let’s review the sequence of analytic thinking. The order of analysis is ideally:

- 1 Define the communications problem (What need?)
- 2 Define the target audience (Who?)
- 3 Define the objective (Why?)
- 4 Define the strategy (How?)
- 5 Define the content (What?)
- 6 Define the medium (Which medium?)

The seventh step is the seed of your script. Let’s call it the creative concept or, if you want, just the concept. This is the first visible step of the scriptwriting process. In a professional assignment, you may not write out all of the thinking you did to answer the six questions although it is common practice to write out some response to a client’s communication problem. I like to set down my thinking for all scriptwriting assignments that are not entertainment. So now you are going to explain in writing to your client, producer, or director what the key idea is, what the approach is, how you will use the specific medium to make the communication work. This creative idea will solve the communications problem, reach the target audience, achieve the objective, embody the strategy, provide the content of the program, and show how it will work in the chosen medium.

To some extent, almost anyone can go through the six steps and get to reasonable definitions of each. The seventh step—devising a creative concept or device that will translate all those needs into a working script—is different. It is a creative task, not an analytic task. It is the work of a scriptwriter’s imagination. This is the source of freshness, originality, clarity, and visual intelligence that makes a program compelling to watch or a pleasure to watch. It is hard to explain and perhaps harder still to teach. This is the imaginative talent that you get paid for.

From this concept your script will grow or die. Until you have a convincing concept or proposal that addresses all of the issues expounded in this chapter, you shouldn’t continue. No professional would. You might pull it off for one assignment

because the topic is congenial to you. Don't let yourself do this. You will be digging the grave of your scriptwriting career. Succeeding in this business is about consistent results, producing again and again whether you are inspired or not. It is about becoming a pro. Confidence comes with practice and experience.

We have kept up a running discussion of several communication problems. Now we can float some creative concepts for them. Just in case you are unsure of what creative concept means, let's clarify. Everything we've discussed so far—the "need," the "who," the "why," the "how," and the "what content" issues—still doesn't give us images or actions to describe from scene to scene or a way of approaching the topic. The trick is to come up with some creative ideas that will encapsulate all of the definitions for a particular medium. One of these ideas will translate into a living, breathing visual idea that will make a script.

Some ideas sound great but don't work out in practice, so you have to test them. If you are writing a college recruitment video, how are you going to avoid the predictable shots of campus buildings with voice-over superlatives extolling the praises of the place? You're creative. You wake up one morning with a brainstorm. You'll do the college recruitment as a Broadway musical. You can see it now—a chorus of coeds singing and dancing instead of a boring voice-over. It's entertainment. The audience will keep watching. It's creative, but somehow it's not right. The idiom doesn't suit the target audience. Ignore the fact that it will quadruple the production costs. The problem is that the creative concept runs away with the communication objective. It doesn't serve it. You lie in bed wondering how you're going to crack this one. Suddenly, you jump up, hit the word processor and type out your idea. Use your own experience to show the audience what a typical day is like, perhaps with a bit of embellishment to work in all the points you want to make. So this will be—a day in the life of an Ivy College student. That gives you a concept that provides the content, the structure, and the objective. It will give the target audience a character to identify with. Any leftover points could be carried by a commentary voice-over.

Most beginners make the mistake of thinking their first idea is the only idea and the one to work with. You should put down at least three different creative concepts for the job, test them out, and then pick the best. So we still have one to go. What would be another way to get at this objective? How about a student who comes on campus and, through a series of interviews, which we carefully craft to reveal the information we know to be necessary, finds out everything about Ivy College?

How do you choose between them? One way is by pitching them to a client, or the class, or your instructor. Another is by your feel for how well the concept will play out through the detail of the content. There are usually trade-offs. Interviews may be good, but scripting them makes them sound stilted and false. On the other hand, how do you know that you'll get what you want if you film unscripted interviews? There's a risk. If you define the six questions with integrity and try out creative concepts, you will isolate a creative concept that works.

The communication problem for American Express was to convey the fruits of its market research to its target audience so that audience would shift their erroneous perception of American tourists in Europe. The research defined categories of travelers such as Grey Panthers, Business Travelers, and Adventurers. They all had different ideas about what they wanted to find in Europe. It was apparent to the writer that the audience of European tourist professionals was complacent and needed to be persuaded by undeniable evidence to change their point of view. In this case, interviewing dozens of each category in unscripted video recordings at an airport yielded enough evidence to corroborate the published market research. It was expensive and a risk, but it paid off. That's the nature of a creative business. It involves risk. That's part of what makes it exciting to be a scriptwriter—to have an idea and see it working in a finished program.

We also mentioned the oil company with the process to convert natural gas to lubrication oils. A hundred million dollars had been spent over 10 years in research. A pilot plant had been built to prove it worked. Here the problem was to get scientific and technical information into a form that would be comprehensible and convincing to the small audience of decision makers. The creative concept that worked was governed by the fact that there was a lot of archive footage that had to be used. The solution was to tell a story—a news story. So the script was built around a current affairs format with an actor playing an investigative reporter talking to the camera and taking the audience through the story. It enabled the stock footage to be bracketed with an explanation. It made the patented process sound like a suspense story. It gave a structure and a variety to quite difficult material.

How about a creative concept for a Valentine's Day message? This is to get your imagination going. Don't send a card. It's predictable and conventional. You telephone your girlfriend. You say, "Look out the window up at the sky!" A microlite is flying around trailing a banner that reads, "I love you, Mary Jane. Will you marry me?" Outside your budget? Go to the exercises and try out some of your ideas.

To finish, let us bring it all together and write a document that sets all these issues down. Sometimes, you need to do this for a client as a first step. Sometimes you need to do this for yourself to prepare for your concept. There is no fixed format or industry-wide convention for doing this. A simple solution is to use the headings we have used in this chapter.

## A Concept for an Anti-Smoking PSA

### *The Problem*

The problem facing all anti-smoking PSAs is that we are trying to convince addicts to quit. We need to get past their defenses and their denial. All the facts about health hazards are already out there. We have to make them real and emotionally affecting. In Massachusetts, there are a number of effective anti-smoking campaigns. One has a billboard the exact size of a room with the dimensions shown and a



punch line: “Second-hand smoke spreads like cancer.” The image and the punch line conspire to make you think. The smoke that fills a room when anyone smokes in it obliges everyone else to smoke. So the spreading smoke is also spreading cancer. Another referred to the number of toxic substances in a cigarette with a tag line saying that it would be illegal to dispose of them in a garbage dump. Another has a simple statistic: “Last year smoking killed 470,000 people.” A recent television campaign against smoking breaks down this number into how many people die each day. The creative visual shows crews piling that number of body bags in a city street. By making the audience see the number as a heap of body bags in a street, the creators make the audience think. You get the idea.

#### *The Target Audience*

Our target audience is primarily young adults and teenagers with a secondary audience of older smokers. The young think they are immune to the hazards. The audience will not accept a lecture and is not really impressed by statistics. They are responsive to images of their own lives. We have to show them in a scene that matches a plausible lifestyle for them.

#### *The Objective*

The objective is to shift the attitude of the target audience and make them start thinking and start worrying. It is to haunt them with troubling images that won't go away.

#### *The Strategy*

The strategy is to create a little sexy vignette with romance and style that does not reveal itself as an anti-smoking PSA until it is too late for the audience to disengage. They respond to it piecemeal until they are stuck with the conclusion. The logic must be visual, not verbal. We use powerful special effects derived from contemporary fantasy horror films (such as morphing) to reveal a sequence of aging, sickness, and death due to smoking-related disease. The reality is like a bad trip or a hallucination.

#### *The Content*

An attractive young man and young woman are in the kitchen after a date sharing a beer and a cigarette.

#### *The Medium*

The medium necessary to convey this message is television. It is primarily a visual message and needs close-ups and special effects that are easy to do with video.

#### *The Concept*

Interior kitchen, a good looking young man has lit up a cigarette with his girlfriend. He offers her a beer. He goes to the fridge and opens the door. Inside the fridge is a morgue. A white-coated assistant pulls out a draw from the freezer. Our character

is visibly shaken, dismisses it, twists the cap off a beer for himself, hands her a beer. Grins. Starts to make seductive small talk. We see her inhale and as the camera pulls back, a special effect reveals the inside of her lungs like an X-ray. Cut to his worried look. Zoom in. Zoom out to the same woman morphing into a much older woman with wrinkles brought on by smoking with emphysema, in a hospital bed, on oxygen. Cut to the kitchen where the couple clink beer bottles. His line: "Your health." Cut to a cemetery. Close-up of inscription: Died from smoking-related disease. Cut to another headstone. Died from smoking-related disease. And another in more rapid succession. Cut to the kitchen. She puts out her cigarette and coughs once. Super text: "Smoking kills 470,000 *Americans every year!*"

Now it's your turn.

## Conclusion

At this point, you know the essential scriptwriting problems. You know the stages of script development. Lastly, you have seen how important it is to think before you write. Thinking through the communication problem with this seven-step method will enable you to generate content. This capacity to break down a problem and come up with creative solutions is part of the job of scriptwriter, especially in the corporate world.

## Exercises

1. You are going to send a Valentine's Day message. You will not use the words "I love you." Using the seven-step method, come up with five creative concepts for five different audiences. Let the changing target audience modify your objective and your strategy. The message does not have to be sent as a video. The question of which medium to use is important. For example, a dozen red roses with a card could be your creative concept. Unchain your imagination.
2. Your job is to devise a creative concept for an anti-smoking PSA using the seven-step method. Come up with five creative concepts for these different target audiences: pregnant women, preteens, college students, and adult addicts.
3. Your assignment is to devise a creative concept for a safety video about (a) carbon monoxide hazards in the home, (b) how to use a ladder, or (c) pedestrian rules for children under age 7.
4. Your assignment is to devise a creative concept to launch a new product to a company sales force: a new car, a new can opener, or a holiday package. Could this be a web site?
5. Your assignment is to write a concept for a video to get people to recycle. How do you define the target audience?

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# Solving Communication Problems with Visual Media

## PART TWO

In the beginning, television was simultaneously a production medium and a live distribution medium. Its production technique was matched to the necessity for live broadcasting. After the invention of videotape recording and the evolution of postproduction video editing, television could be produced with single cameras by non-broadcast companies as well as the broadcast behemoths. The television signal can be produced outside the studio, recorded, and edited on videotape. Television is now independently a distribution medium as well as a production medium. Television programs can be delivered to the end user by broadcast radio signal, by satellite, and by cable. To this now add netcasting via Internet web pages. Other methods of program distribution are theatrical exhibition in a movie theatre, videocassette sales and rentals, and optical disks such as CD-ROMs and DVDs.

Let's not confuse the distribution medium with the production medium. A program delivered via a given medium may not be produced in that medium.

For example, a feature film, shot on film, even a film produced mainly for television can be exhibited in a movie theatre and broadcast, or cable-cast, or delivered by satellite transmission or on all of the media mentioned. A television quiz show or a news program would probably be restricted to over-the-air broadcast, cable, and streaming to the web. A documentary could be delivered to you on many of the media mentioned. Multiple-camera studio production, the traditional and original television production technique, is different from single-camera video production, even if the final product is shown on television. So the medium of distribution must be distinguished from the medium of production. The script is a production document, not a distribution document. Therefore, the writer must think in terms of the producing medium, not the distributing medium. Knowing that you can see documentaries on television does not help you write them.

The logical progression of our learning process is to apply what we know to specific media formats. Many of them have special requirements. Many of them have preferred formats that the industry has adopted. Each of these types of program has a definable characteristic that we need to learn about and practice writing. Although they are all visual media, the writer has to think about them in different ways.

In this section, we will pay close attention to the use of visual media to solve communication problems that are principally informational, promotional, instructional, and persuasive. This includes solutions to both corporate communications needs and commercial messages as well as factual documentary and educational content.

## Ads and PSAs: Copywriting for Visual Media

# 5

Before television, there was radio advertising and film advertising in movie houses. You still see local ads in some movie theatres before the program starts. So the principle of selling time between programming for commercial messages grew up with the visual media. A format that is probably unique to television was developed to deliver short visual commercial messages very efficiently and effectively in breaks between programs. The air time was sold to advertisers to generate the operating revenue and profit for the television companies.

Television provides access to the majority of homes and, therefore, to the largest audience. Before television, few people had dealt with the pressure to communicate product or commercial information in a rapid, attention-getting way that television needs. It was, and still is, very expensive to buy air time. Because television is the most expensive advertising medium, it has driven the writers and producers of commercials to refine their techniques so as to deliver a complete message in a small amount of time. The cost of this time far exceeds the production cost of making the message itself.

The short ad has become a kind of twentieth-century art form with a constantly evolving style. It has attracted much writing and directing talent from around the world, drawn partly by the money they can make and partly by the opportunity to graduate to longer forms. Ads are special because they are so short—usually under a minute. Everyone has seen them, which is not so true for some other formats.

Almost all television viewers have seen public service announcements (PSAs), which are messages that are broadcast for the public good. PSAs are sometimes paid for by sponsoring organizations, but they are usually furnished to broadcasters to fill any empty spots in the commercial break. This is one way in which television stations help the community to which they broadcast and fulfill an obligation of their FCC license to broadcast over public air waves. Of course, PSAs usually run late at night or in other less commercially desirable time slots. Not everyone can write a feature film script, but anyone can write a 30- or 60-second PSA, so it is a good place to start.

## Copywriting Versus Scriptwriting

Let us distinguish between copywriting and scriptwriting. Copywriting includes print and media writing. National advertising campaigns on television are devised and produced by advertising agencies retained by the client company. Learning about this kind of writing and the business of advertising and public relations usually takes place in a specific track and specialized courses in communications studies. Although visual writing is involved in some kinds of copywriting, there are so many other issues involved in copywriting that it is better to leave those dedicated issues aside and deal with visual writing that happens to be part of copywriting.

However, small markets in the broadcasting world serve local clients who cannot afford an advertising agency. Somebody has to write these ads for the station's clients. It could be a staff member, part of a unit that sells the station's time, or it could be a freelance writer paid by the station to do this writing work when needed, or a local ad agency. We need to keep in mind that these kinds of local ads are made on small budgets, sometimes at cost, by the station selling the air time because their profit comes from selling that air time. They often have spare production capacity—a studio, cameras, a camera crew, and an editing facility. This means that the ad must be written for that budget range without slick effects or expensive graphics, without travel to expensive locations, and without expensive talent. It brings us back to the perennial challenge that every scriptwriter faces: to write creatively and invent original visuals within a tight budget framework. The same holds true for local PSAs, sponsored by organizations with no budget to spend on production.

PSAs are an excellent training ground for student scriptwriters. They are short and complete TV playlets. They require all the disciplines of scriptwriting. You can easily settle on a public service issue such as smoking, domestic violence, education, drugs, or racism. You know the issues. You can test your creative imagination. If you have a related production course going on, you might be able to produce your PSA. You can also take a familiar product and try to devise a TV spot for it. However, a lot of ads rely on specialized production companies to get pack shots or create computer-generated effects that might be difficult to duplicate in a college production setup.

## Client Needs and Priorities

The PSA and the TV ad are works commissioned by a client. The client needs a solution to a communication problem that the writer must provide. We alluded to this discipline of the professional writer in Chapters 3 and 4. You write for someone or rather someone who represents the interests of an organization or a corporation. Later we will look more closely at another kind of writing for a producer of entertainment films or programs. The entertainment script is different

from commissioned works because neither the producer nor the writer can know for sure what a good script is until it is produced, shown to an audience, and validated by box office or audience ratings. Commissioned programming doesn't have an audience measurement expressed in terms of box office revenue. Successful communication can only be measured by quantifying audience responses as changes in sales or behavior.

Advertisers expect to measure the effect of an ad in increased sales. Otherwise, there is no business sense in spending money on it. A PSA often aims to change people's behavior. It is much more difficult to garner information that positively proves the effectiveness of the PSA. Changes in behavior are much more difficult to achieve than changes in the buying choices of the public.

Writing for clients is often challenging and exciting precisely because you have a problem, know the desired result, and have to devise a solution. The seven-step method of Chapter 4 is an excellent way to approach these assignments. The process of analysis is really important for writing PSAs. Although you do not now have a client, you must practice writing as if you had a client to satisfy. Your creative ideas must do the job. One of the constraints of this kind of writing is that the length is fixed by the client. Because the resulting product is transmitted in commercial breaks, its length must be exact to the second, as that is how airtime is bought and sold.

## The 20-, 30-, and 60-Second Playlets

Ads in the form of 20- or 30-second playlets are almost a new art form. They are a popular art form born of the television age and the need to compress visual messages into very short, very expensive time slots. The style and tempo of these ads continues to evolve at a furious rate. The style of camera work, directing, and editing is quite specialized. Some companies produce nothing but TV commercials just as some directors spend their whole careers making these mini-movies. From their ranks have come a number of feature film directors such as Ridley Scott, Hugh Hudson, and Alan Parker.

Some TV commercials for national campaigns of major brands, based on millions of dollars worth of air time, have very high budgets. With bigger budgets than half-hour documentaries and budgets as big as a television half-hour episode, these productions are made on 35 mm film with production crews that sometimes rival those for a feature film. The local market spot for a car dealer or furniture store, however, is often cheap, down and dirty. Clearly the national campaigns are developed by advertising agencies whose copywriters develop the ads in collaboration with creative directors, art directors, and account executives. The copywriter is not a full range scriptwriter and also usually has to write print media ads. Although this book primarily serves the interests of scriptwriters, the visual thinking that underlies billboards and transport ads relates to both copywriting and scriptwriting.

## Visual Writing

We think of writing as words end to end forming an exposition, but media writing, particularly television advertising, needs a visual idea. This is another layer of writing. The visual idea is what we refer to as meta-writing in earlier chapters. There is a difference between visual meta-writing and the writing found on a page of script for a visual medium whether in the mini-drama of an ad or a full length feature film. The scene descriptions contribute to a visual idea that transcends the screen moment and rests on many of those moments, hence meta-writing. It is an idea that informs and governs the written detail of the script. The dialogue, which is an integral part of the writing and exposition, is not itself visual writing but a necessary component of it. Radio ads need dialogue writing but not a visual idea. So visual writing is the idea as well as the description of specific images or shots. It needs what we will call a visual metaphor. Let's look at an example.

How do you explain viruses, spam and computer security to the general public? AOL sells its internet service by emphasizing its virus scanning and spam blocking features. Here visual writing comes to the rescue. You need a visual metaphor. Two guys in a cafeteria line are choosing food. On their trays are a ham sandwich and a tuna sandwich. One asks the other why he would want just basic high speed internet service when he can get AOL's high speed service with virus protection. The second guy doesn't get it. To explain the difference, the first guy puts a dish cover over the tuna fish sandwich, then explains that going on line without AOL virus protection means you pick up loads of spam and nasty viruses. He ladles ketchup and other condiments over the ham sandwich as he describes the spam and viruses, and then asks, "Which would you rather have? AOL with virus protection," as he lifts a plate cover from a clean tuna sandwich, "or basic high speed internet." The other guy says, "I'll have the tuna fish." "You can't; it's mine," is the reply as the loser is left with a ham sandwich covered with an inedible mess.

This shows us a way to visualize an abstract idea of internet security. Spam and viruses are hard to explain. Two sandwiches, one protected and one ruined by junk, works as a visual metaphor that organizes the whole communication. That kind of organizing visual metaphor is often the key to successful visual communication. So there is an equivalence between visual metaphor and meta-writing. They constitute visual writing.

## Devices to Capture Audience Attention

Most of you have engaged in the subtle war between the viewer and the television advertiser. Hands up everyone who has hit the mute button during the ads, or gone to the bathroom, or gone to the fridge, or made a telephone call during the commercial break! This nullifies the advertiser's effort and expense. Sometimes,

either by accident or by choice, we find TV commercials entertaining or fun to watch. The challenge is clear. The advertiser has a lot of resistance to overcome. Now you are on the other side of the box. You have to be creative and capture the audience's attention in spite of itself so that it pays attention to your message. Your device has to work for others. Measured by your own viewing behavior, no audience will give you any quarter. You live or die in seconds.

What are some of the ways you have noticed writers of these mini-scripts hooking the audience so that it will pay attention to the message? You can recognize definite strategies such as humor, shock, suspense, mini-dramas, testimonials, special graphic effects, music, and, of course, sexuality. These strategies are more elaborately developed in commercial advertising because for-profit companies have the dollars to spend on high-end production values. PSAs cannot command the same resources. They are made on lower budgets or created through the pro bono work of advertising agencies and production personnel. Working with a low budget is a creative challenge. Production dollars don't automatically buy creative and effective communication. Some of the most ingenious PSAs are cheap but effective.

Consider how a PSA about a public issue such as gambling works. In this case, the Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling needs to communicate to a population that suffers the destructive consequences of this kind of addictive behavior. How do you solve the communication problem? Let's apply the seven-step method we learned in Chapter 4.

#### *Define the Communication Problem*

The population of compulsive gamblers includes gamblers who are isolated by their problem and do not see that they are not alone. They do not fully comprehend the consequences of their addiction or are unable to do anything about it. The Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling does not have a handy database of compulsive gamblers and cannot easily reach isolated individuals who need help to tell them about a confidential help line. The Council wants to reach out to a hidden population.

#### *Define the Objective*

The PSA alerts compulsive gamblers and those who know them to the existence of their addictive behavior and communicates an 800 number to call for help. An informational goal includes letting gamblers know that it is a common social problem. A motivational objective is to get gamblers to think about their problem and move them closer to changing their behavior. The highest goal is a behavioral objective: Gamblers will stop gambling, or they will at least call the 800 number.

#### *Define the Target Audience*

The target audience demographic is difficult because it cuts across age, gender, and social class. The audience has to be identified by a behavior pattern. Many gamblers, like alcoholics, don't want to acknowledge their problem. The psychographic of the

audience is probably resistant. Many in this audience will have ways of dismissing the message, believing they have everything under control.

#### *Define the Strategy*

The audience has to recognize its problem in the powerful images shown in the PSA. The PSA must get their attention and get to their hidden thoughts and awaken a secret wish that all those losses due to gambling could be stopped. Use a strongly visual device that is emotional rather than logical in effect because compulsive gambling is an emotional weakness, not a logical choice.



#### *Define the Content*

Recognizable scenes of gambling dominate the 30-second PSA (see Figure 5.1). A montage is shown of close-up shots of rolling dice, cards being shuffled and dealt, scratch card numbers being revealed. This is accompanied by a voice-over (see Figure 5.2).

#### *Define the Medium*

Television is the medium of broadest appeal to the population at large, which includes the target audience. Television lends itself to emotional appeal and motivational messages.

#### *Define the Creative Idea or Concept*

The effective creative concept is to use a strongly visual device to make the emotional connection to the audience by turning back the clock. Footage of gambling action is run backwards while a voice-over articulates the wish that time could be turned back and losses undone. The visual effect of seeing the fantasy realized compels attention. This device of reversing time and showing action undoing itself is a visual effect unique to the medium. The voice-over drives home the message of how these images relate to the buried wish to escape compulsive gambling. You are not alone; more than 2 million Americans are in the same boat. There is an 800 number help line to call. Finish with an invitation to call and talk.



You see that the seven-step approach breaks down the problem and identifies the solution. You can read the script and see the PSA as it was produced on the accompanying DVD.

## More on Ads and PSAs

In the short form of the television commercial, visual communication is critical. It enables a great many ideas to be compressed into seconds. Doing this requires visual thinking and visual writing. A PSA produced for the New England Home for Little Wanderers (shown in Figure 5.3) puts a 30-second story together that has to convey a dysfunctional home and domestic abuse. The visual metaphor, which



Figure 5.1 Storyboard for "Turning Back the Clock," a PSA on gambling sponsored by the Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling. (Storyboard by permission of Pontes/Buckley Advertising.)

<b>MASSACHUSETTS COUNCIL ON COMPULSIVE GAMBLING</b>	
Turning Back the Clock (30 second TV Spot) Written by Jerold Gelfand	
Note: All action takes place in reverse. In addition voice-overs alternation male and female voice (possibly overlapping) with the final words "my life" simultaneously spoken (staggered) by several of the characters.	
VIDEO	AUDIO
A clock going backwards in fast motion with an optical jerking effect	VO: I want to go back to a time when life had promise . . .
Tight shot of man at home office desk full of papers, envelopes, bills, booklets as well as a light and a drink. With pen in hand, he slams both hands down and sweeps the contents of desk onto the floor then clutches his hands to his forehead cradling his head in pain. 4 seconds	VO: . . . to a time when giving up wasn't an option to a time before running away seemed to be the only answer
A shattering vase becoming intact again after being thrown against the wall. 3 seconds	VO: . . . when finances weren't fought over but discussed . . .
Tight shot at pawnshop counter where customer is giving up a watch (with clasp) for cash. 4 seconds	VO: . . . and before family heirlooms were sold for cash.
Gambling situations shown backwards (i.e., tights shots of cards being undealt, dice jumping back into person's hand, person unfilling-in lottery ticket numbers, person unscratching scratch ticket. FADE TO BLACK 5 seconds	VO: . . . back to a time when gambling didn't control my life.  SFX crowd noises then "sucking" sound on fade to black.
FADE IN TEXT Over two million Americans suffer with problem gambling. 3 seconds	VO: Do you need help turning your life around?
FADE IN TEXT You're not alone! 2 seconds	VO: Call us and let's talk about it.
FADE IN TEXT Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling 1 800 426-1234 We're in the Yellow Pages	

Figure 5.2 Script for "Turning Back the Clock."

also works for the sound track, is breaking glass. The shattering of a child's life, his family, and his future is captured by a single image.



Another excellent example is the corporate TV spot for First Union (see the DVD). Let's look at the context. Banking is regulated by state and federal laws and agencies. Formerly, banks were not allowed to have interstate branches,

<p>Client: The New England Home for Little Wanderers  Agency: Boston ITVA PSA Committee  Title: Family Portrait  Medium: 30 second television spot</p>	
VIDEO	AUDIO
The visual look is cold, monochromatic blue.	(MUSIC-increasing tension.) (SFX-The pulse of a racing heart.)
<p>FADE UP ON . . .  EXT. ALLEY. DAY.  (4 seconds)  An urban alley in a poor part of town.  Garbage and debris litter the ground.</p>	(Over this sound, we hear a series of DESPERATE VOICES.)
<p>From a low angle, we look up at a tough,  angry thirteen-year-old BOY.  A CIGARETTE is jammed into the corner of  his mouth. He walks through the alley with  anger and attitude, kicking at the trash  and smashing his book bag against the wall.</p>	<p>WOMAN'S VOICE (VO)  (angry, frustrated, desperate, rising in  pitch, losing control)  (slight echo)  "The school called again. What am I going  to do with you?!"</p>
<p>The image in the alley is interrupted by a  FLASH CUT  (1 second)  (Full color.)  A happy family PORTRAIT. A single mother  and the thirteen-year-old boy. He's dressed  neatly in a tie.  A jagged CRACK slices across the glass.</p>	(SFX-Glass cracking.) (1 second)
<p>CUT TO . . .  INT. ROOM. NIGHT.  (4 seconds)  A young BOY, six or seven, huddles against  a wall, terror and pain in his eyes. Behind  him, we see the SILHOUETTES of a man  hitting a woman.</p>	<p>(SFX-Woman crying. Struggling.  Bottle breaking.)  FATHER'S VOICE (VO)  (angry, drunk, slurred speech)  (SFX-SLAP.)  "Don't you <u>ever</u> turn away  (SLAP) from <u>me</u> when I'm <u>talking!</u>" (SLAP)</p>
<p>FLASH CUT (1 second)  The family PORTRAIT. Father, mother, sister,  and the young boy.  A jagged CRACK slices across the glass.</p>	(SFX-Glass cracking.)
<p>CUT TO . . .  EXT. ALLEY. NIGHT.  (4 seconds)  A young GIRL, eight or nine. Tight on her  face. She cringes at her disturbing  memories. We move in closer and closer  until all we see are her haunted, tear-  stained eyes.</p>	<p>YOUNG GIRL'S VOICE (VO)  (pleading) (slight echo)  "Please don't. Please don't touch me there.  Daddy, I'm scared."</p>

Figure 5.3 Script for "Family Portrait," a PSA for the New England Home for Little Wanderers. Reproduced courtesy of Peter Cutler.

FAMILY PORTRAIT The young girl in happier times with her mother and father. As if struck from behind, the family portrait SHATTERS into a million pieces.	<i>(MUSIC stops and is replaced by the sound of shattering glass.)</i>
Jagged pieces of the portrait explode toward the camera in slow motion.	NARRATOR (VO) For some children-and some families-life is a shattering experience.
	<i>(MUSIC-brighter, hopeful)</i>
(FULL COLOR) As the shattered pieces of the family portrait float toward us, we DISSOLVE to the LOGO-  <b>The New England Home for Little Wanderers</b>	NARRATOR (VO) We help put the pieces together again.
DISSOLVE to the phone number- <b>1-888-The Home</b> over a soft focus background of rich, spring time, green grass and deep blue sky.	NARRATOR (VO) To find out how you can help, call 1-888-The Home.
In the background behind the phone number, we see a tiny CHILD'S HAND reach up into the frame. A large MAN'S HAND reaches down and holds it tenderly. Fade up the tag line- <b>Children Families Futures</b>	For people who really need a helping hand.
FADE TO BLACK	<i>FADE OUT MUSIC</i>

Figure 5.3 Cont'd.

could not sell insurance, could not be stockbrokers, could not be merchant bankers, could not run mutual funds and so on. Now banks can combine financial services in these different areas and compete with other financial institutions. This has led to mergers and fundamental changes in the banking industry. The communication problem is that most people don't know how to tell one bank from another and don't understand the changes that are taking place in the financial world. Explaining financial matters to the consumer is difficult because most people are confused by financial products and intimidated by financial institutions. Companies large and small using different institutions for different financial services find themselves having to rethink their relationships and having to use new financial products such as derivatives to manage risk or so-called "junk bonds" to raise capital.

The objective of the First Union commercial is to get consumers and potential customers to grasp the change and see First Union as an island of security in a dangerous world and the solution to their problems—one-stop shopping for all of

their financial needs. The strategy is to show the financial world as a surrealistic nightmare, then to confront the problem, and then to have First Union provide the solution. The metaphor chosen is that First Union is a mountain. This is a visual image also backed up by the voice-over, which in a series of ads ends with a variation on the statement “. . . come to the mountain called First Union. Or if you prefer, the mountain will come to you.”

It is axiomatic that the impact of the message here must be visual, not verbal, in essence. To do this requires images at the cutting edge, compositing cinematography, alpha channel effects and computer-generated images that capture the audience’s attention and set up and condense the message. In each of the ads, there is a visual narrative that makes sense on its own but is complemented by the verbal narrative, which functions on another level. The visual narrative is broadly emotional in impact. The verbal narrative is broadly rational in impact. Scripts of this kind almost always have to be story-boarded. Look at storyboards and view the video results for two First Union ads on the DVD.

For example, the visual metaphor of survival in shark-infested waters compels attention. The dorsal fin cuts through water with the financial wreckage of dollar bills and financial paper floating on it. The water is the runoff from a storm—a storm sewer that floods corporate boardrooms. The storyboard is 19 pages long for a 30-second commercial. With two or three key frames per page, the pace of visual flow is pushed to the limit. In contrast, the voice-over is measured and minimalist: “In the financial world . . . the one requirement . . . for long term survival . . . is to keep on the move. It is not a world for the hesitant or the timid.”

What more effective way to suggest corporate merger than to show two skyscrapers crashing together, or whole buildings being moved on huge caterpillar tracks? Such a visual metaphor exploits cutting edge computer imaging techniques. A scriptwriter could not put the image down on the page without some understanding of the techniques that are available. Ten years ago the technology probably did not exist to make this TV commercial. It is extremely difficult to tell how these state-of-the-art TV commercials were made. Visual writing creates content that flows from contemporary production techniques. Hence, visual writers must understand the repertoire of techniques available to the producer. Compositing 3-D animation, graphics, and live action take the writer to the limits of verbal description. Hence, the reliance on storyboards.

We should step back and reflect on the underlying principles. Aristotle mapped out the basic techniques of persuasion in his theory of rhetoric. They involve either an appeal to reason (*logos*), an appeal to emotion (*pathos*), or an appeal to ethical values (*ethos*). Although there is a connection between what you learn in basic writing courses about argument and the techniques of visual persuasion, the persuasion is not accomplished by words alone. Images have a vocabulary and a grammar. Many devices and strategies are available for hooking audiences and planting the message. It is like the strategy of the flower in nature. Show bright colors, give off powerful perfume, and produce sweet nectar. Bees and other insects will be



attracted by the color and aromas and feed on the nectar while coating themselves with pollen, which they will carry to the next flower so as to fertilize the plant. The clever message maker creates nectar or seductive qualities that attract the viewer who carries away the message whether he likes it or not, just as the bee carries the pollen away.

What are some of these devices? What follows is an informal survey of strategies of exposition that a scriptwriter can use to communicate in the television medium.

### *Humor*

Most people are attracted by humor. If you watch an evening's ads on television, you will find about half of them use some kind of comic device. Either the characters in the ad are funny in their behavior (a man behaves like a dog and his dog like a man, tossing the man treats for clever behavior), or the spoken lines have an amusing or clever turn. Comic conception can be expressed in visual graphics. Cats and dogs can be made to talk. Animation can create cute M&M characters or the Pillsbury chef. Morphing can change the expression of people's faces or distort them for effect. Arms can be lengthened to score amazing slam dunks. Much of the humor we see is a form of exaggeration. Slapstick from silent film days continues to work in ads: dogs running away with toilet paper, physical struggles with equipment or materials.

Using humor in an ad carries a risk. The risk is not being funny enough for your audience. Bad jokes or unfunny humor can be a turn-off. Many corporate clients are nervous about humor as a device because they worry that their company or their product might not be taken seriously. Nevertheless, humor is a very effective way to disarm hostility and skepticism in a target audience. It appeals to both emotion and logic. Think of the Sprint campaign with *Murphy Brown* star Candice Bergen, or the MCI's "Tweety Bird" campaign with Michael Jordan. The logical appeal talks price per minute of a phone call. The come-on to look and listen is the humor. Fun relieves tedium. Jokes or gags often work on a logical principle by challenging that same logic. If you can get the audience to smile, they will probably listen to your message.

Compare the humorous approach of the underdog Subaru Outback featuring the Crocodile Dundee character with the serious ads for Chevrolet and Ford trucks. The latter are about work and reliability and power. The former are about recreation. The strategy is appropriate to the audience demographic and the product.

### *Shock*

Shocking an audience is a way of getting its attention. Shock can take many forms. It can be violent, such as explosions. It can be funny and unexpected, like the Taco Bell talking Chihuahua or chimpanzees dressed up as people drinking tea. It can be a truck falling off a bridge attached to a bungee cord, or a window cleaner on the glass face of a skyscraper who finds a long-distance telephone salesman winching

down next to him. Whatever it is you do to shock, you have to follow your own act. You have to use the attention you get to good effect. Many people are good at getting attention but not so good at holding it. Consider the streakers at games. Taking your clothes off and running out into the middle of the field pursued by policemen and officials will get the attention of the whole stadium, but then what? You can be outrageous, surprise the audience, or do something unexpected, but if all the audience remembers is the device and not the message, you have failed. It is easy to shock but hard to fold it into an effective message.

### *Suspense*

Suspense is a different way of getting an audience's attention. Shock images often lead into suspense. What's going to happen to the truck attached to the bungee cord? Comic suspense works as well as a balancing act or juggling or a character in a predicament. A villain jumps on the Subaru Outback truck to attack the driver. We get a 5-second suspense drama. Crocodile Dundee actor, Paul Hogan, always triumphs without effort as he drives the Subaru and tells deadpan jokes to the camera. Suspense means that the device makes the audience hold its breath until it knows the outcome. Suspense, like shock, is easy to start and hard to finish. The revelation at the end must justify the wait. We all experience feeling cheated by this plot device in certain movies of suspense that short change the audience in the outcome.

### *Drama*

Can you tell a story in twenty seconds? Television commercials have got it down to an art. Quick cuts minimize the visual information and allow mini-dramas, mini-love stories, and mini-plots to unfold. There's the entertainment story in which a brand of coffee serves as a focal point. A host or hostess makes noises in the kitchen like a percolator and serves up instant coffee. The comedy reinforces the message that you can't tell the difference between fresh coffee and instant if you don't know which is which. These dramas can become little mini-series so that audiences become intrigued about the next episode. Meanwhile, they get exposure to the message. A credit card gets a character out of a scrape like in an Indiana Jones adventure. Someone has a splitting headache or a migraine. An important life event such as a key assignment at work, or a wedding, or a date is barely manageable. A friend urges the person to take the brand name painkiller. The crisis is averted, and it's smiles all round. The strategy is to mime little dramas typical to life and organize a happy ending turning on the use of the product.

### *Kids*

Children, babies, and animals are always good for *pathos*. People respond to cute kids and cute animals. Temporarily, they stop using their brains and respond emotionally. Children aren't only used for breakfast cereal. A recent ad for Delta,

promoting their new nonstop flights, showed a little girl sulking because her daddy didn't change planes in Chicago anymore and therefore couldn't buy her a present.

One of the cleverest and most effective uses of a baby ever was achieved by Michelin in a television commercial. On screen are four tread marks from Michelin tires on a flat color background. The commentary makes the point that the main safety features of any car are the four points of contact with the road. Match dissolve to a baby sitting on the ground in the middle. Viewers are forced to use visual logic to put together two ideas. You want to protect the most vulnerable passenger any of us will carry—a helpless baby. The tire tread of your four wheels is your only contact with the road in all emergency situations. Your choice of tires is a factor in that safety. The sell is just the brand name on screen. The visual logic goes something like: (baby vulnerability standing for indisputable wish for safety) + (choice of tire is your choice of tread contact with the road) = (brand name Michelin). It is elegant, simple, and brilliant as a piece of visual communication. A variation was to put a baby inside an automobile tire smiling and gurgling happily. Again, the economy of the visual imagery forces the audience to understand the message through visual logic. This is a picture worth a thousand words. Visual imagery is nonverbal communication. Michelin's ad communicates effectively through visual imagery. This is meta-writing at its best resulting in stunning visual metaphor. Simplicity is also a virtue in Michelin's highly creative and inexpensive ad. Such visual writing is not limited to advertising. It is essential to powerful dramatic writing for the screen.

### *Testimonial*

There are two types of testimonials: real and fake. Another way to categorize them would be to contrast celebrity testimonial with simulated testimonial. If you can find a well-known personality to endorse your product, you get the attention of your audience. The public will give you the time of day because of the famous name. Sprint used Candace Bergen because of her notoriety in the TV series *Murphy Brown*. This was followed briefly by Sela Ward because of the success of the ABC TV series *Once and Again*. Now Catherine Zeta-Jones performs a similar role for T-Mobile. Cosmetics, perfumes and beauty products often use an actress as a poster girl for their products.

Simulated testimonial occurs on television everyday in ads for pain killers and cold remedies. We have become inured to them, but they must work well enough because advertisers keep using them. A white-coated actor playing a doctor, speaking earnestly into camera, affirms the effectiveness of the drug. An anonymous but professional-looking man or woman usually walking along in a tracking shot, speaking into the camera, tells you sincerely how one pain killer is prescribed by doctors more than any other. The presenter mimics the role of a news reporter, expert, or anchor. Many ads for feminine hygiene products rely on simulated and acted testimonial by a suitably cast representative woman.

Real testimonial also has a place in this repertoire of strategies. Housewives testify that a given laundry detergent washes whiter than another. Or, submitted to

a double-blind test, they just happen to pick the load of laundry that was washed with the advertised product. AT&T ran a series of ads that were based on real, spontaneous testimonial of people on the street saying that they preferred AT&T long-distance service. As the production company was filming, the lawyers were vetting the content and ruling whether the statements could be used or not. People in the shots used were paid and had to sign a waiver permitting use of the testimonial. This last example is an unscripted documentary technique. Most of the others are scripted ideas. Most of these devices can be used in longer corporate videos as we shall see in the next chapter.

### *Special Effects*

Today, many of the images we see on screen are computer generated. The 1999 prequel of the *Star Wars* trilogy, *The Phantom Menace*, is rumored to contain at least 80 percent computer-animated images despite the presence of live actors. Industrial Light and Magic, the company founded by George Lucas, has been responsible for many of the extraordinary computer generated special effects in theatrical films such as *Jurassic Park*. Now there are so many software toolkits on PCs and Macs that can create stunning graphics and animation that contemporary scriptwriters can fantasize scenes almost without inhibition.

A good example is the First Union ads that make skyscrapers merge and collapse to make a visual metaphor for corporate merger (see the video on the DVD). The camera wanders in a surrealistic, computer-generated fantasy world, a futuristic urban landscape reminiscent of *Blade Runner* (1982), suggesting the predicament of the consumer trying to deal with the world of financial services. It is a visual statement about the alarming uncertainty of the financial world.

Palm trees and crabs can be made to dance on a tropical beach to advertise a cruise line. A fully formed Dodge is morphed out of a sheet of metal. As a rule, these special effects are ways of getting attention by challenging visual norms and defying reality. Once again, the device has to serve the message, or the audience will remember the effect and not the message.

### *Sexuality*

Sexual innuendo is probably the oldest technique of all. Every new medium has exploited erotic interest, whether the early moving image peep shows (Edison's Kinetoscope, then the rival Mutograph), interactive CD-ROMs (*Virtual Valerie*), or the Internet, where so many web sites purvey pornography. In the advertising world, sex sells. Is there an ad for perfume or aftershave that doesn't imply that the product will attract the opposite sex like flies? The same goes for most fashion advertising. Beer and soft drinks get on the sex bandwagon too. A strong seductive technique of persuasion is the look straight into the lens. Another technique you recognize is the big close-up of lips, or the framing of some part of the female body—looks, smiles, batting eyelashes. Somebody has to write this stuff into a script. What we see, however, is the finished product, which has been produced



and directed. The director has interpreted the script and talent has interpreted the role, but the intention is clear: to get audience attention by appealing to their sexual interest.

As I'm writing this paragraph, the television is on. An ad comes on for an herbal shampoo. A woman whose car has broken down is stopped at a gas station. She asks the mechanic under the hood where she can freshen up. He throws her a key. In the washroom, she washes her hair (fat chance!). Pack shot! As she washes she starts to cry "Yes, yes, yes." Dissolve to brushing out her dry bouncing hair as she emerges from the rest room. "Yes, yes" becomes louder. The mechanic looks up, bangs his head on the hood. The radiator spurts steam. Get the allusion? She asks if the car is ready. He says it will be a little while longer. Pack shot with a title: Herbal Essence—A totally organic experience. Get the pun? Notice the rip-off of the film, *When Harry Met Sally*, in which Meg Ryan simulates an orgasm in a restaurant? Somebody wrote this ad with the sexual strategy in mind. The shampoo confers sexual power on the woman who uses it. Many others have followed in the same vein.

## Recruiting the Audience as a Character

One common and effective way to use the television medium is recruit the audience as a character in the spot. Television and video work well in close-up. When talent looks straight into the lens and addresses the audience, a direct connection to the viewer is made. The artifice of the camera creates a psychological effect that approximates someone speaking to you personally. Many spots are written so that a character speaks confidentially to the audience. It is the exact opposite of the fictional film technique, which depends on the actors never looking into the lens. In fact, the illusion of the film story would be instantly destroyed. Exceptions are certain comedies that deliberately use the technique of an aside to the audience, which derived from the theatrical device of a character speaking to the audience much used in Shakespearean and Restoration comedy. Ads frequently use asides and very often rely on a to-the-lens address.

## Mixing Devices and Techniques

It is not difficult to see that many ads and PSAs combine more than one of these strategies. You can be sexy and funny. Special effects can be a means of creating humor. Television is a powerful medium and it is not surprising that commercial organizations quickly worked out ways, helped by public relations practitioners, of establishing a presence and making use of the power of the medium in ways other than paid television advertising.

## Infomercials

The infomercial is a relatively new television format that has grown up with the emergence of cable television channels. It is another way for a channel to make money. Companies or enterprises pay for the time, which is cheaper than the broadcast channels that make money selling spots in network programming. You've all seen them. They masquerade as interview or talk shows, in which a guest or guests are talking to a presenter about a product or service. There are real estate schemes, get-rich-quick seminars ("I guarantee you will make money out of my scheme"), exercise devices, cosmetics, diet plans, you name it. They are periodically interrupted with buying breaks in which the 800 number comes on screen with the credit cards that can be used to purchase the service or product. While some of this dialogue can be improvised as in a talk or interview show, the format itself has to be scripted.

## Video News Releases

The video news release is another result of the proliferation of television channels. It is the video equivalent of a press release in print. Companies create a news story related to a product that is professionally produced and distributed free to TV stations in the hope that they will insert it into the news. Many smaller markets are short on material and find that a professionally produced story about a new pharmaceutical drug embedded in a story about scientific research into cancer fits nicely into a science reporting category. The fact that this particular manufacturer's new drug is featured as part of the story is acceptable if it is not too blatantly promoted. It is not advertising. It is a new form of publicity planted in news-like stories. A lot of this type of writing is given to journalists because it resembles journalistic writing. It mimics the objectivity of the news story and utilizes the same techniques of to-camera presenters and documentary footage.

## Billboards and Transportation Ads

Billboards are a form of visual communication for commercial purposes that has evolved with the increase in consumer ownership of automobiles. Of course, people riding on surface public transport also see city billboards, as do pedestrians. Large surfaces such as the sides of buildings become canvases for outdoor ads that have developed a style and technique appropriate to the medium. The primary determinant of how a billboard works is its method of delivery. Delivery of the message depends on drive-by duration. You do not see crowds gathering around billboards, as the dominant audience of billboards is the motorist or passenger of a

motor vehicle. The sight line from the billboard to the viewer exists for a matter of seconds as the vehicle drives by.

This fundamental context for reading billboards and posters leads to several logical axioms about billboard copy writing:

- the message has to be comprehensible within seconds
- there has to be a strong visual idea behind the billboard
- text takes too long to read and has to be limited to large phrases
- the visual idea can work independently of text
- messages use strategies of humor and shock, just like TV ads
- successful campaigns become series (Got Milk?)

The billboard illustrates very well the difference between informational, motivational and behavioral objectives. Clearly, information which is mainly text dependent has a limited place. Although behavioral objectives can work and billboards can deliver 800 numbers to act on, the primary objective is going to be motivational. Billboards are interesting examples of visual communication because of the severe constraints imposed on their content, which must read in an instant. Their message has to achieve an extreme economy in audience capture and communication.

In 1999, the Outdoor Advertising Association of America commissioned a study to measure motorists' response to outdoor advertising using special "ShopperVision" eyeglasses that document the actual seeing experience of a passenger's perspective.<sup>1</sup> The study shows that the following elements are important and register with an audience as follows in descending order of importance:

- Bright/cheerful colors 30%
- Uniqueness (movement/extensions) 26%
- The color 'yellow' 18%
- Catchy/clever/cute/humorous 14%
- Personal relevance 14%
- Familiarity/repeat exposure 12%
- Product illustration 12%

If a campaign deploys more than one medium, like the "*Got Milk?*" campaign, it allows billboard design to trade on the print ads and exploit the familiarity and repetition. A print ad can use more text because the page can be studied. In the billboard, the image predominates. The milk moustache becomes the main visual idea coupled with celebrity. So two strategies are combined. First, there is repeat exposure across media which helps. The humor is important. All kinds of celebrities are, in a sense, brought down to the level of you and me. The visual makes a great common denominator. The image of the milk moustache makes a wordless statement.

Again, Apple's "Think Different" campaign use a celebrity value in its print ads and billboards. However, they are not like the "Got Milk?" celebrities because they are, more often than not, historical celebrities. They are creative geniuses, usually unconventional, not necessarily beautiful. Because they did not follow convention or the crowd, they were innovators, inventors, thinkers, scientists, and artists. The visual statement is, "Here is a genius who changed human history." They are not using Macs; indeed, most could not have. The association implies that people like these tend to choose Macs; this is communicated visually. They thought differently. The ad invites you to do the same. Buying a Mac and using a Mac by association links you to genius and originality. This kind of visual elision between thoughts that compresses a syllogism into a single glance has to rank high as visual communication. It is more than just a picture; it is a train of thought. Of course, the text, "Think different," is itself a verbal and grammatical embodiment of the picture. So they are apposite. One is a clue to the other. "Think" is a verb in the imperative mood. Adjectives ("different") do not modify verbs despite the vernacular misuse of the language in phrases such as "I did good." The correct expression would be, "Think differently!" So the deliberate grammatical mistake underlines the message, which expresses the maverick and unconventional mind.

Although visual writing is generally narrative, this narrative needs key moments and key images that compress the meaning into a single glance. Most good films have such moments. Even corporate communications, as we have seen, depend on this visual poetic device which is the equivalent of a figure of speech. It is called metonymy. Apple's Mac stands for originality, for creators, for those who think differently than the crowd. The viewer is a character or a player in the ad. A key component of the ad is the viewer's recognition, or the viewer supplying a missing link. It is the visual compression of a statement: if you know who Maria Callas



Figure 5.4 "Left, an advertisement from the "Got Milk?" campaign. Right, Muhammad Ali in Apple's "Think Different" ad campaign."

(a famous opera singer and artist) is, you are part of a certain elite. If you recognize Einstein or Bob Dylan, you are part of that elite that thinks “different.” That elite uses Macs. It is part of the same world. You could argue that it is the opposite of “Got Milk?” “Think Different” is exclusive; “Got Milk” is inclusive. The one is for the few; the other is for the many.

As you drive into or out of Boston on the Mass Pike, you see a number of billboards. The one that most merits our attention is dedicated to gun control. It is not a normal billboard, but the side of a long building. The messages always contract and compress verbal and visual meaning once again in apposite ways. The ad that comes to mind consisted of a statement in large letters, “Bullets Leave Holes.” At the end of this phrase, we see a series of frontal shots of kids. One of them is an outline blank hole where a child was. The verbal cleverness in the *double entendre* on “holes” matches the visual image and gives it value.

Another example of ingenious visual communication found in downtown Boston concerned an anti-smoking campaign. The billboard is the approximate size of a room with the dimensions marked on the billboard. The text message is: “Second-hand smoke spreads like cancer.” The double meaning of “spreads” anchors the visual idea that is instantaneously understood, that the way cigarette smoke diffuses throughout a room is a potential cause of cancer for non-smokers in the room. The image is the smoke, which is the cancer spreading. The power of this idea is that the audience fills in the blank billboard with the visual—a room with furniture and a smoke haze. The audience has been coopted to create its own visual. This is a very effective strategy because each viewer has an individual personal image, which is more powerful than a generic image that the advertiser might try to create.

The billboard and signage industry is the domain of the copywriter rather than the scriptwriter. The copywriter is going to have to work closely with a creative director or a graphic designer so that the very few words allowed on the billboard achieve concision, bounce off and complement the visual. The text stripped out would probably mean very little unless it were a company slogan or motto with an independent existence. However, there is little writing that precedes the design in the form of concept or needs analysis because agencies probably use an artist or graphic designer to draw roughs and then pitch the concept verbally at a creative meeting. This is really meta-writing or visual thinking that underlies the creative idea.

So we see that visual writing is critical to an advertising copywriter’s arsenal. It applies to transportation posters and to full page print ads which often work like posters with a key phrase that unlocks an image. The visual has to be strong to attract the reader flipping through pages of ads to get to the articles in a magazine. This way of constructing messages as a kind of informational and motivational sandwich is very effective and is essentially the same mode of imagination that informs the work of the scriptwriter. The kind of writing we are trying to develop—compressed, elided, visual—is common to copywriters in an advertising world, or scriptwriters in a corporate or entertainment world.

## Advertising on the World Wide Web

In 1996, there was little or no advertising on the internet. In 2006, advertising is a problem. There now exists a battery of new ways to reach audiences by inserting messages into web interaction, from animation to pop-ups, to click mapping that tracks the browser. There is a new form of digital signage that puts messages on the desktop of web users via their ISP or their internet portal, in relation to their browsing choices. Writing web copy has to reflect a new medium and how it functions.

Advertising on the web has many advantages. It is cheap to produce and can be updated quickly and easily compared to print and television. It can get the viewer to respond by providing interactive cues to click on something that is either fun, instructive, or logical that will produce a result, answer a question or show you a product. The links allow the ad to occupy very little real estate on the desktop but link to client web pages where an unlimited amount of detail can satisfy any level of consumer curiosity. The traffic can be measured by clicks and hits on web sites, a much more precise measure than ratings on television or circulation of print media. In the latter media you do not have any measure of how many viewers see or read your ad other than the ratings and audience share. This is a guess, whereas web hits can be counted.

Web portals are businesses that need to build significant value for customers. Their objective is to get people in front of their content. To do this, they have to personalize sites, browsers, and portals to flatter the user. Search engines, formerly simple utilitarian tools, are evolving so that searching becomes embedded in other activities such as downloading music, viewing pictures, reading articles and collecting information. The next generation of search engines will learn your interests and habits.<sup>2</sup> Association of products and services with personalized search engines will provide more efficient advertising. You can see this strategy working by using the Google search engine. Product placement increasingly provides a click through link to take you to a web site to buy. Paid-for click advertising becomes a major source of revenue.

Copywriting for the web will undoubtedly change so that the advertising will be structural rather than text based. The function of advertising, which is to deliver a message about a product or service to an audience that potentially needs or wants it, will be served by delivering the surfer to the relevant site. The message will be enacted based on embedded intelligence in the browser gathered from the way you use your browser rather than offered to an audience for response. You don't need to respond to a particular message because your responses, at least your range of responses, are already known. You see ads that correspond to your interests.

As advertising on the internet increases in quantity and interactive complexity, copywriters and creative directors will have to comprehend interactivity and begin to conceptualize campaigns that integrate with internet services and interactive content on websites and interactive entertainment media. These are discussed in Chapter 15.

## Formats

Applying visual writing techniques to commercial messages involves the whole gamut of devices and strategies that are available to the medium of moving pictures, whether video or film. Advertising and promotional budgets often allow writers and producers to exploit all the special effects and all the technology of the medium. The most adaptable format for the writer is the dual-column format. It is much easier to communicate very precise, split-second timing of shots, effects, and voice-overs by lining up numbered shots in parallel so that the producer knows exactly what to shoot and the editor knows exactly what to edit. To communicate to clients who may not be able to read the dual-column format easily, storyboards serve the important function of visualizing the key frames for the client so that the image can be related to voice and effects. The storyboard, however, does not describe all of the detail of the shot as well as the dual-column script can. Camera movement has to be described, as do transitions and effects. The dual-column script is sort of like the architect's blueprint, whereas the storyboard is somewhat like the architect's sketch of what a building will look like. The client needs the sketch; the builder needs the blueprint.

## Conclusion

Ads and PSAs are highly concentrated mini-scripts that embody many of the techniques of longer form entertainment scripts. They require visual writing and rely on strong visual communication. They are an excellent training ground for beginning writers. Many of the techniques discussed in this chapter apply to longer forms of video communication that are needed by corporations and organizations to promote, sell, or market products and services. They are also used for training, education, and self-help. These applications are dealt with in the chapters that follow.

## Exercises

1. Watch PSAs on television and analyze how they work by writing down the seven-step thinking behind them. In other words, reverse engineer the ad.
2. Call up a local advertising agency or a local public service organization and ask them what public service announcements they are working on and offer to write one.
3. Pick out an advertisement or PSA that really holds your attention. Analyze how it works. What is the creative strategy that keeps you watching and therefore being exposed to the message?
4. Write a storyboard of an existing commercial or PSA that you know. Try out the software program Storyboard Artist.

5. Pick one of the strategies or devices described in this chapter and use it to write a TV spot or a PSA. For example, use a shock effect in a PSA on drug or alcohol abuse, use sexuality to sell a healthy diet, or use humor to promote racial tolerance and diversity tolerance.
6. Write an infomercial for the business idea of an on-campus laundry service.
7. Write a video news release for a new birth control drug in the context of research into human reproduction.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup><http://www.oaaa.org/images/upload/research/200324847362083611150.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>This is the vision of Jerry Yang, co-founder of Yahoo!, expressed in a television interview with Charlie Rose on PBS television in March 2005.

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## Corporate Communications

# 6

Corporations, nonprofit organizations, government departments, and businesses large and small often use a visual medium like video to communicate important information and ideas to both internal and external audiences. Before video, they used film. Corporate use of visual media started early, although infrequently, in the days of silent film. Armour & Company, the Chicago meat packers, used the Polyscope Company to make a promotional film of their stockyards to counter the negative publicity brought about by Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle* (1906), which exposed the less-than-desirable practices of the meat-packing industry.<sup>1</sup>

Today, making video and television for corporate clients, often called the non-broadcast industry, is a huge business, larger even than the more visible broadcast television industry. It is hard to see that because of the way television and cable dominate most people's lives. The general public sees very little of the output of the non-broadcast producers for the simple reason that the target audience for these videos is rarely the general public, and the videos are seldom seen on cable or broadcast networks. You may get to see an industrial or commercial video as a customer of a service or a purchaser of a product. Most people do not think about the vast number of writers, producers, and directors who make their livings creating these videos for corporate clients. Many of these creative talents migrated from the broadcasting and entertainment worlds. Some of them work in both.

The "modern age" of mass communication began in 1924, when sound was linked to pictures for the first "talkie." Though it's not widely known, the first time sound was synchronized with film was for a classic PR use—a 1924 informational tour of Western Electric's Hawthorn plant, hosted by the company's Vice President.<sup>2</sup>

Many very large corporations, like FedEx, maintain private television networks to communicate with their workforce or sales force. Others have their own production studios and postproduction facilities. They are largely self-sufficient producers of their own video needs. As such they are like a production company within the corporation that employs writers, producers, directors, graphic artists, editors, and the supporting personnel to produce a large number of videos or programs

each year. The management decision to invest in the equipment and overhead to produce in-house would only be triggered by a large and ongoing need for visual communication within the company.

Even so, some companies contract outside vendors or video production companies, of which there are many in each major commercial center, to make their videos for them. Some companies do both. They make some productions in-house and contract out others. Many buy services from freelance creative talent such as directors and, in particular, writers. It is probably true to say that most scriptwriters are freelance although there are staff positions within these corporate studios. One way to see the size of the industry that services corporate video production needs is to look at the Yellow Pages for your city under “video producer.” You will see that most companies listed, other than the producers of wedding videos, produce commissioned audio visual work for clients.

## Typical Corporate Communication Problems

To understand the business of corporate media, you need to look at some of the communication problems that corporations and organizations face for which media can be a solution. For example, when I bought an early model cellular phone, Bell Atlantic (now Verizon) supplied a video to explain how to use a cellular phone and how their cellular system worked. A professional anchor or actress talked to camera. Cutaways to close-ups showed how the phone worked. The video answered a number of the questions that come up for a person using such a product for the first time. Most videos of this kind have a cost benefit. That is to say, the cost of making the video is compensated by a saving to the company in customer service calls and the employee time needed to deal with basic questions. In other words, this company anticipated a problem and found a solution by making a video. There are other factors and other benefits. Forestalling customer problems and making the product or service more successful is a strong benefit that is hard to value in dollars and cents. It is worth a lot and justifies the video dollars that a management decides to spend on the communication exercise.

This example shows that there is a rationale behind any video that is commissioned by an organization or corporation. Now corporate marketing and public relations employs non-linear as well as linear media. Brochures and catalogues are produced on CD-ROMs and DVDs. Product catalogues are searchable databases on a web site. So the need to match a solution to a corporate communications problem extends beyond plain “vanilla” video.

Production companies have to be more versatile than they used to be. The range of media solutions has increased, and video has become a component of fixed interactive media and web sites. Corporations and organizations have a range of communication problems that need to be solved. Solving those problems is a creative service that production companies supply. They also provide production



and postproduction services. They deliver a finished product ready for distribution. Small business-card size CDs can hold a promotional brochure for products and services. Video is primarily motivational rather than informational, often a component of fixed interactive and online media. The range of media solutions has expanded so that step 6 of the 7-step method that queries what medium is appropriate and why becomes more urgent and a key part of developing a creative concept.

In this process, the scriptwriter has an important role. You need to understand that role, and you need to see how to develop your thinking and writing skills to make a career in that field. Earning a living in that market is much more likely than in the entertainment market, which is smaller and highly competitive. It is easier to sell your talent to write a \$1500 script for which the client or corporate producer is taking a small risk than to persuade a TV producer that you can write a series or even an episode of a series, let alone a feature film for which budgets run into millions of dollars. Let it be said, though, that you should not limit yourself or your ambitions, and that you can migrate from one market to another and back again.

To understand the kind of problem that writers are given in the corporate market and for which they have to devise solutions, you have to start thinking from the client's point of view. You have to see their need, their predicament, and, sometimes, their shortsightedness about their own communication problems. Corporate video is not about self-expression, that is, saying what you want to say. It is about expressing what others want to say. Sometimes they don't know what to say or how to say it. Selling your visual writing talent to help them find a solution can be creatively demanding and personally satisfying, as well as financially rewarding. It does mean, however, that you won't necessarily deal with themes or topics that you would freely choose to write about.

Because the client determines the subject matter and the message, the writer often has to learn about fields of activity, manufacturing processes, or technical information that are totally new. This makes the field intellectually exciting and challenging. You never know what is going to be thrown at you. You learn about all sorts of things that you would otherwise never come across. That is why a good general education with strong verbal and analytical skills is important. Every company's business has unique products or special preoccupations that you have to assimilate and communicate to an audience. You have to read and digest manuals, brochures, and do background research, not to mention absorb verbal input from managers, subject matter experts, and employees on site visits. You are often entrusted with confidential or sensitive commercial information. You need to get up to speed very quickly and be able to discriminate between essential information and background noise. Corporate scriptwriting demands a creative imagination combined with a realistic understanding of business environments.

Corporate communication problems are never ending. A pharmaceutical drug company wants to get the attention of cardiologists, so it makes a video about pacemakers and the latest technology instead of trying to hard sell a particular drug. In this way, it can get the attention of its target audience, create an event

and promote the drug indirectly. Shell invents a bitumen compound that won't wear out but is more expensive than traditional road asphalt. It also results in a porous road surface that allows rainwater to drain away, thereby putting a stop to hazardous plumes of spray behind trucks and other vehicles. How can a petroleum company persuade municipal and highway authorities to use the new product when it is more expensive than traditional asphalt surfaces? One effective communication tool is to show how the product works. When trucks pass from a conventional road surface to the patented porous surface, the camera shows how the plume of spray drops instantly. Then there is a story to tell—how the product was invented, case histories, testimonials, and benefits. The scriptwriter is the one who has to learn the story and interpret it to the chosen audience.

A department of education wants to ensure safety in school laboratories where Bunsen burners and chemicals pose a hazard. How do you do it? How about getting a known television comedian to dress up as a school kid and pretend to be going through all of the mistakes that school children go through? It is funny and serious at the same time. You have found a way to reach a young audience and get them to pay attention to a message and absorb information. Designing a successful script and seeing it made into a working video is a really big turn-on. Getting paid to do it makes it an even greater pleasure. Are you getting interested?

A telecommunications manufacturer supplies state-of-the-art light-wave multiplexers (get your mind around that one), and has to respond to an enhanced delivery and installation timetable imposed by its main customer, who is losing a million dollars a week in revenue because of lack of capacity to handle the traffic. You have to communicate a new schedule and plan for a way to deliver and install exchanges and motivate the people involved to achieve the objective. You get a 2-inch-thick manual for technicians to read and have to figure out what it all means and what will make meaningful video and what information is best left in print form. Maybe this is not much fun, but you are a professional. You can think through the communications problem and come up with a solution. The corporate world is willing to pay big bucks for these solutions.

An oil company faces perennial safety issues because hydrocarbons are volatile and flammable in both liquid and gaseous form. Every maintenance procedure involves serious hazards because teams with different skills are involved and may not know what the others are doing. A lock-out safety procedure is in place that protects the life of each worker, not to mention the physical plant of the refinery or tank farm. When it has been ignored, it has led to loss of life in accidents. How do you get the life-saving message across? The audience must watch, listen, and learn. Perhaps more important, the audience must change its behavior or put into practice what it learns from your video. You are the ringmaster, the impresario.

A laboratory department in an oil company needs to show the executive board that its research facility saves its cost many times over because of specific improvements to drilling mud and a process that saves the loss of expensive chemicals in the refining process.

A national chain of record stores wants to train its personnel in procedures that reduce shoplifting and to make sure that they know how to deal with a shoplifting situation correctly if it occurs.

A construction company that has built cooling towers for a nuclear power station wants to show its engineering innovations in managing the job with pre-cast concrete sections and coordinating teamwork in erecting the tower. Construction takes over two years. What makes their engineering different or better than anyone else's? You have to find a visual metaphor or way of telling the story that makes the difference.

The regional government of Midi-Pyrénées in France wants to promote itself as a dynamic region for investment to aerospace and biotechnology companies that can benefit from the existing national research laboratories and research university of Toulouse. You have to find a way to blend history and modernity and weave together a bundle of separate stories.<sup>3</sup>

A company wants to educate new hires in the corporate jargon that is full of acronyms and abbreviations that are like a foreign language and must be learned by all new hires to understand written and spoken communications.

## Other Corporate Uses of Media

Corporate communications is a fast moving and dynamic world. Producers are quick to innovate and propose media solutions that exploit the very latest technology. So corporate video has changed over the years. It has become shorter, more motivational, and targeted at specific opportunities. There is no better way to capture a CEO's message to shareholders or to employees, now more likely to be streamed to the corporate website rather than distributed on videotape. Think of video as a component in increasingly interactive solutions on the web. This make sense, especially when content needs to be updated regularly.

Fixed media are ideal for cheap distribution of catalogues, interactive brochures, and service manuals when the content will have a reasonable life expectancy. Corporate marketing can choose between a product launch in a meeting with a video component or a website with its potential for viral marketing as well as traditional video, increasingly likely to be on DVD and therefore, offer interactive options. So Annual General Meetings, product launches, product promotion, sales training, technical installations, service manuals and product updates, all can be delivered via interactive solutions on a website or on fixed media. There are public relations stories, annual reports to shareholders, and prestige corporate image videos. There are internal public relations explaining policy changes, product changes, and health and pension benefits. There are endless training needs including safety training, personnel training, and management training. Training is such a big part of corporate communication that it merits a chapter of its own following this one. A later chapter in Part IV dedicated to writing for interactive media has more on interactive corporate communications.



## Meetings with a Visual Focus

Management means meetings. Management constantly needs to communicate new policies, information, and strategies to submanagers and to employees; so they have meetings. Small meetings might be built around a computer-produced slide presentation. These sorts of PowerPoint presentations with graphic presentation of facts and figures and bulleted points can be projected on larger screens for larger meetings. Big companies also hold big meetings because they have hundreds of managers or sales representatives. They want to motivate these people to do a better job or to put a new policy into practice. They want to bring all their dealers together to launch a new product or a new model. Good marketing starts by getting the dealers to believe that the new product or new model is competitive and that they can make money selling it. The manufacturer might spend what to us is a small fortune on a meeting with visual focus. This might include slides, video, music, live demonstrations, and the “reveal,” which is a dramatic unveiling of the new model or product that inspires the audience of dealers. Without the visual focus, the meeting would boil down to speeches by sales executives and CEOs. Talk is talk. You can only take so much.



Meetings are also about rewards. IBM used to mount an annual awards event for its best salespeople called the Golden Globe Awards. They were often held in an exotic location, such as Honolulu, Cannes, or Las Vegas, with presentations and keynote addresses by senior executives in the company. It was a reward but also an opportunity for internal public relations and promotion.<sup>4</sup> If a company brings together 1000 or more of its sales force or its dealers, it has an unparalleled opportunity to communicate corporate vision and motivate its people. Such meetings can be very elaborate, big budget extravaganzas with highly original concepts accompanied by elaborately produced multimedia presentations designed to motivate the sales force. Motivation is, as we have said before, derives from the same root as emotion. Motivation with words alone is possible but difficult. Great orators have great reputations, whether Cicero in the Roman Senate, the representatives of the first continental Congress of the States, or Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg. Great orators are not common in corporate management. Visual media can call on powerful visual images and multi-track stereo sound that impacts the senses so that messages are experienced as well as heard or read. Guess who is needed to think up these visual experiences and develop the management themes? Yes, scriptwriters! More work for scriptwriters who know how to deal with corporate communication! This is big business. It is also exciting to do. It is a kind of business theater.

Mars, a candy manufacturer, is having an internal meeting of salespeople to launch a marketing and sales program. To dramatize the meeting and its rivalry with other candy bar manufacturers, the conference is built around a giant chess board on which key pieces of the sales strategy correspond to chess pieces. A real chess game is worked out that ends in checkmate for the competition. Key executives speak to the themes, which are dramatized by moving a life-size chess piece on

the floor. Writing the speeches and writing the scenario for the marketing chess game is work for a writer.

## Getting Background and Product Knowledge

The most important job a writer has to do is to think, not just write. If the right thinking takes place, the right writing will follow. When you write for clients, you have to get inside their business, inside their mentality, and adopt their communication problem. Of course, you bring an outside point of view to their problem, which is one of your strongest points. You see with fresh eyes some salient feature that to them is habituated and sometimes no longer visible.

There are several ways to get background: by reading, visiting places, and talking to people. Reading could start with an encyclopedia and end with a memo. Most clients dump all the literature, manuals, and brochures they can find on you. Usually, there is more than you need. You have to apply a selective filter to it all. You have to formulate in your mind an inclusion/exclusion mechanism, learning to discard the material that is beyond the scope of your subject matter. You also have to measure the depth of knowledge you need about a given detail. You cannot become a cardiologist overnight, or a petroleum chemist, or a telecommunications engineer. You can, on the other hand, think through the audience's need and read intelligently on their behalf.

Another way you can collect information is by visiting the client's place of business, production sites, and sales outlets. This visual input is crucial for most writers. It shows you the most likely locations for action settings. It provides you with visual background and images that help you to write for the camera. Sometimes, it also enables you to see and understand industrial and manufacturing processes or technical problems that remain abstract if all you do is read about them.

The last way of collecting information, talking to people, is also indispensable. This could mean talking to your client's managers, employees, or customers. You frequently have meetings with small groups of people called together by your client because they all have expertise, experience, or interest in the subject matter. You have to listen carefully, think quickly, and ask relevant questions. Take names and contact numbers so that you can consult particular people when you are on your own and baffled by a question which one of these people will surely be able to answer. One or more of these people will be subject matter experts, sometimes referred to as SMEs.

## Using Subject Matter Experts

A subject matter expert is someone designated by the client as an authority on a particular topic or subject matter. If a video project involves technical or scientific

subject matter, an SME is a necessity. If an SME is not assigned to the job, you should ask for one or more. Talking to this person is often the breakthrough that you need. A good tactic is to ask the SME to explain things to you in response to specific questions that you think out. Most SMEs love to explain things. Most videos are targeted to an audience that is much less knowledgeable than subject matter experts. Therefore, your interrogation of an SME makes you an ambassador or a representative for that audience. It is an exciting and responsible job entrusted to you as a writer researching the topic or theme.

## Video Versus Print Media or Interactive Media

The world of corporate communications is very dynamic and in a state of constant evolution. 16mm film was once the only production medium for visual communication. In the 1970s, Sony's industrial U-matic videocassette format (1966) was joined by the domestic half-inch formats of which only JVC's VHS format survives. Video recording and portable video liberated television from the exclusive province of broadcasters and studio production. Location and production costs came within the budget of corporate departments. Then the convergence of video and computers in a digital domain led to a form of production that allowed multiple media to coexist in digital form on a computer hard drive. Then programs could be made that were menu driven and nonlinear. Linear program content runs from beginning to end in a predetermined order and period of time that the viewer must follow, whereas non-linear media allow random access determined by the user. Video was then subordinated to an interactive multimedia world. This interactive multimedia experience could be stored on a CD-ROM or DVD, and also exist as a complex cluster of web pages at a site on the World Wide Web.

Finally, we must remember that traditional print media are still valid and unbeatable for certain kinds of communication. A great deal of information is most easily accessed and absorbed by using the old Gutenberg technology. What we have now is a repertoire of communication media and communication methods, each of which has advantages and disadvantages. The choice of medium has to be matched to the job.

## Video as a Corporate Communications Tool

Although film and video are both linear media, there are differences between them. Film is photographed and its postproduction time is longer and less versatile in terms of effects and transitions. Film produces a better quality image but it needs a special darkened room with a projection booth, a projector, and a projectionist to give an audience the full experience. Modern digital high definition video can match 16 mm quality, and film is no longer a corporate medium. Video production is quicker to

produce and thus more responsive to urgent business needs. The final product can be distributed on a familiar VHS cassette, DVD, or streamed over the web. It can be played by anyone on equipment that is found everywhere. The screen size, and, hence, the audience size, is limited, but that has not inhibited its growth and popularity as a medium for corporate communicators. For large audiences, more than one projection screen, or more than one monitor can be provided.

Another reason for the success of video is its use of the familiar idiom of television, an idiom that every member of the population understands. Everybody is educated in the language of the television screen from an early age. Therefore, corporate producers can capitalize on the devices and styles of television programming to get their messages across.

The television screen on which the messages are delivered is an intimate and personal medium because only small groups can view it, sometimes a single individual at a time. Video and television make good use of close-ups and communicate the body language of human expression, particularly the face, very effectively. Hence, video communicates emotion effectively. Emotional themes and concepts work well. Another advantage of video is that you can get instant playback, both when you shoot it and when you view a finished program, merely by rewinding the tape.

Now video has incorporated most of the stunning special effects that can be created with graphics tools developed for computers. Both computer-generated graphics and live-action video images can be manipulated electronically in extraordinary ways by postproduction tools that digitize the video image. This contemporary style is well illustrated by the TV spots for First Union Bank (see DVD).

Corporate video has often innovated beyond broadcast television because corporate producers are free to use new formats and tools initially not admitted to the realm of the broadcast signal by the guardian engineers who rule NTSC broadcast standards. Corporate producers have always experimented with new devices and formats that would make their work easier, cheaper, or more effective regardless of whether it met broadcast standards.

Video can embody film, television, photography, computer graphics, and music. It is a linear experience starting at a specific frame and ending after a specific duration of time. This has advantages. We are used to it. So video is very versatile and offers a range of narrative techniques and styles that we need to study, master, and learn to write. Its disadvantage today is that it is not interactive and does not allow for user input. Interactive communication and how to write for it are the subject of a later chapter in Part IV.

## Corporate Television

Many large corporations set up their own closed-circuit television channels. They acquire studios, equipment, crews, and creative staff to produce daily programming, which is distributed by cable or satellite to its branches and offices around



the country or around the world. The television medium, originally the exclusive province of public broadcasters with FCC licenses, has escaped and been reinvented in private networks to serve business communication needs. This non-broadcast world, largely invisible to the general public, constitutes a large industry with a turnover in billions of dollars that employs a large number of professionals, probably more than the broadcast world. Corporate television, although not held to the same technical standards as the public broadcasters, uses much of the same equipment and is produced much to the same standards.

The only reason a company would spend all that money on television or video programming is because it gets value for it. Communication of information is critical to the efficient functioning of a business. Many kinds of communication are more effective on television. Some corporations are as large as small countries and their offices are geographically dispersed. Television brings the corporate audience together. It therefore has an internal public relations potential that is incalculable. Think of the difference between seeing a CEO explaining a takeover crisis compared to reading a memo about it! Think of the advantage of being able to communicate to employees in a visual medium that is understood by all! Product launches, training, company news, and company benefits can all be narrowcast on the corporate TV network.

## Script Formats for Corporate Videos

It is probably fair to say that the most common format for corporate video is a dual-column format (see the Appendix). Remember that in the dual-column format, the visual description of what appears on screen is written down in the left-hand column. The audio description of what is heard on the sound track is written down on the right-hand column. These two columns are read together so the producer can assimilate all of the information needed to produce the scene. It is the easiest way to write for video once you get over the beginner's tendency to mix up the two categories of audio and visual.

In practice, corporate video uses any and all types of production concepts including drama, news, and documentary. Instead of using the dual-column format, scriptwriters may adopt formats that are typical of those other types of productions, such as a master scene script for a dramatic concept (see *Charley Wheeler's Big Week* by Peter Cutler on the DVD).



## Developing the Script with Client Input

Corporate scripts are not written for the writer; they are always written for the client. Before writing anything, you need to consult with the client and research the communication problem as explained in Chapters 3 and 4. At each stage of

development, presentation of the concept, treatment, and first draft script involves informal feedback and finally formal acceptance of the work. Each stage needs client approval before you continue. This process is critical to the success of the project. Every writer has had the experience of working with a client who barely reacts, or reacts after the script is written. There are clients who do not understand their role in advising and collaborating to achieve a successful corporate communication. Books devoted solely to corporate writing provide greater insight into this problem, which is part of the writer's job but not part of the writing.<sup>5</sup> The writer of corporate work has to be able to manage relationships and gently orchestrate the necessary responses if they are not forthcoming. Writers who work in the corporate field learn that clients sometimes waste their time and waste their own resources.

## Length, Pacing, and Corporate Style

What is the length of a corporate video? Answer: as long as it takes to do the communications job at hand. Some corporate videos can be a few minutes; others as long as thirty. Over the years, since video has become a commonplace corporate communication tool, practitioners have studied the success or failure of videos with audiences. When an audience is watching a television screen for reasons other than entertainment, the attention span is short. You will happily watch a 2-hour program with characters, plot, story, conflict, and action. When the content concerns ideas, information, products, management policies, or other informational content, your capacity to concentrate and retain information falls off exponentially after 15 minutes. If a program can stay under 10 minutes, it might be more effective. The 15-minute limit has always seemed a good one. In recent years, the ideal length has come down to 10 minutes. There are exceptions. In every case, the length must be justified by the interest of the content and the effectiveness of the program making. Narration styles that wrap a message in a dramatized story always play longer than factual recitations or talking heads.

## Devices that Work for Corporate Messages

The beginner looks at a corporate communication problem and probably thinks that the message is so factual or so specific to a product that it can only be tedious. But some of the most creative and exciting opportunities for writing and program making come out of corporate work. It is precisely because the message content is presented in the raw that the writer and production team have wonderful opportunities to innovate strategies to reach the audience and invent devices that make the program watchable.

Writing a script, whether fiction, documentary, or corporate, involves finding a structure. A writer's fundamental problem is to find a structure that will organize

the material in such a way as to take the audience along. Therefore, it has to be an idea that the audience grasps. This idea can be either explicit or implicit. It can be announced as a key for the audience to the organization of content. Or it can be a sort of rack on which points hang. Most stories are implicit structures whether novels, plays, or films. An exposition such as a lecture or a business presentation is usually laid out as a plan with headings and subheadings so that the audience knows where it is going. The structure that enables the scriptwriter to bring together all the details and communicate a comprehensible message usually rests on one of a number of devices. We need to know what they are and see how they can be used. In corporate video, it has become commonplace to borrow from television and imitate other types of program.

### *Dramatization*

A common device is dramatization. Even though corporate drama or comedy productions might not equal entertainment vehicles in production value or talent, dramatizing a message is an effective way to engage an audience because it tells a story and creates characters with whom the audience can identify. It is particularly effective for training videos, which are discussed in the next chapter. In *The Right Direction*, a training video for financial advisors, the writer wants to make a point about communicating financial information to customers who are not familiar with financial matters. One effective way to make the point is to invent a dramatic situation with characters. First get the audience involved in the story. A driver, lost in the country, asks for directions from a local. Once the audience gets into the story, the moral of the situation can be made clear. In fact, this piece uses several devices in combination—dramatization, voice-over narration, and graphics.

AT&T produced a video for a wide public called *Connections*. Its target was a non-technical audience. Its objective was to imagine the future of telecommunications and how it might impact our lives. To bundle together all the diverse points, it needed a device like a story in which the audience would encounter the future telecommunications technologies in the context of work and leisure activities. A young woman who has been working in Asia has become engaged to a Belgian doctor. When her mother and father meet her at the airport, she uses a future AT&T phone with voice recognition and simultaneous translation of foreign languages. The father is rather taken back. He faces his own struggles as an architect and city planner when one of their rebuilding projects meets resistance from a community teacher who needs classroom space. We are introduced to a universal terminal that functions as a video telephone and computer, networked to huge databases that enable efficiencies we are just beginning to see since the film was first conceived in the early 1990s. We learn how the mother, who is a doctor, can practice telemedicine and prescribe a prosthesis for a hockey player consulting a physician in China. The *Connections* video is an excellent example of corporate production values being used to communicate a complex message about where technology is leading (see DVD).



### *Humor*

Another helpful device to capture audiences is humor. A lot of clients are nervous about jokes and humor. This is not comedy hour. The humor has to serve a purpose that delivers the message. Humor can help make a point that if, put in the form of explanation, would not be nearly as effective. So you enliven the situation with humor. The predicament of people lost in the country is amusing to most of us who have had a similar experience. This scene from *The Right Direction* helps the target audience to understand the predicament of the client, getting multiple directions from different sources.

POINT OF VIEW—DRIVER (8 SECONDS)

The car pulls up to another younger country farmer walking along the road. This fellow is the opposite of his older cousin. Where the older farmer was slow and thoughtful, this fellow seems to have overindulged in his morning caffeine. The younger farmer looks in the window and addresses the driver. (Also shoot alternate straight delivery.)

YOUNG FARMER

(extremely fast delivery)

You can't miss it. Just take forty-three three miles to two-twenty-two then go north five minutes on twenty-five or twenty-five minutes on five. Got that?

POINT OF VIEW—FARMER (2 SECONDS)

Stunned look on the driver's face. His mouth hangs open. He blinks his eyes in disbelief.

POINT OF VIEW—DRIVER (9 SECONDS)

YOUNG FARMER

(not waiting for an answer or taking a breath)

Good. Turn right on seven for one point seven miles then take a left on one-seventeen 'til you hit the seven-eleven. At the seven-eleven you'll see a sign for seventeen cross seventeen then back over seven to one-eleven. You with me?

POINT OF VIEW—FARMER (2 SECONDS)

The driver twitches his head, nodding, trying to follow the torrent of numbers raining down on him.

The audience understands the way a salesman can confuse a customer by delivering reams of facts and figures familiar to him but unfamiliar to the customer. The other point made is that the customer needs to know these things just like the lost motorist needs to get directions. The situation is recognizable, humorous, and drives home the point.

### *Visual Metaphor*

The same example uses a technique of visual metaphor. A metaphor is a figure of speech that shows one thing to be like another in a different context. In prose or poetry, it is commonplace. To speak of the sword of justice or the scales of justice is to use a metaphor. In a visual medium that strings images and actions together, it is extremely difficult to make up good metaphors and even more difficult to elaborate them without disrupting the narrative continuity of the piece. *The Right Direction* uses a visual and dramatic metaphor to make a point. In long hand, the argument goes something like this: If you are lost in the country and you ask a local to give you directions, the local is often so familiar with the area that the directions—although perfectly clear to him—are confusing to you. Such directions are usually given too fast and in too much detail. You end up being confused by the person helping you even though he feels he is trying his best. Most people have experienced this dilemma and get the point of the scene.

As a scriptwriter, you have a voice-over say something like, “Listening to a financial advisor talk about money and investment involves unfamiliar vocabulary.” You convey to your audience of financial advisors that even though potential customers want to go in that direction and learn the necessary background to make good decisions about their investment, they are confused and lost. If you, the financial advisor, speak to them as if they know what you know, they won’t get it. You will not be providing the service you could and, worse yet, you could lose the customer. You could put all this in a voice-over and show a meeting going on with occasional cuts to staged dialogue between advisor and customer. This is the lazy way, and too often the weak way, of presenting a message that gets into corporate videos. The writer of *The Right Direction*, Peter Cutler, has found the kind of device that will carry the point in a way that the audience will grasp without realizing that they thought about it.

The visual metaphor of the driver lost in the country asking a local farmer for directions is a situation with which the audience can identify. The extrapolation to financial advising can also be made in the voice-over once the audience is emotionally and imaginatively prepared. That is how this script works. Moreover, *The Right Direction* does something else worth noting as we learn the craft of corporate communication. It builds a visual metaphor into the structure of a script. Hence, the title.

EMC corporation’s original business was data storage, but has now become information management. Storage is measured by physical disk capacity, but the value of the information stored is determined by accessibility and functionality.

Managing information flows makes storage work. So how do you express this abstract idea visually? What flows and changes shape and speed and has multiple applications in personal, industrial and natural spheres? Water! Water illustrates information flow. Images of surf, streams, mighty rivers, dams, waterfalls, raindrops, all illustrate flow and change. An elegant video results that makes the abstract ideas concrete, visual and highly watchable (see a video clip on the DVD). *Sea Change* is composed almost entirely of stock shots edited together with music and commentary to make a provocative short video sequence that does not mention the product. If you can identify the problem and imagine a solution for which your client corporation's product is the solution, you get your audiences' attention and make them receptive to a sale at some later point. Visual metaphors are the key to visual writing and effective scripts.



I once had a large construction company as a client. They were building the cooling towers for a nuclear power station. They wanted me to define their efficient methods and their uniquely innovative solutions to the engineering problems of the job. They had to work to a deadline to synchronize with the rest of the project. There was a lot of visually exciting action with a huge crane at the center of the tower. The complexity of the project and the orchestration of the different interlocking phases of the project, which unfolded over 2 years, explained the construction company's prowess. The last sentence contained a metaphor—orchestration. It became the breakthrough idea to bring the story together and explain the nature of the achievement. The plans were like the score. Getting 70 or 80 musicians to play together to the same beat and create great music is difficult. Not all orchestras are the same or as good as one another. Getting seven or eight teams of specialized craftsmen to work together efficiently is more than just a hiring job. The different teams of iron workers, riveters, cementers, and scaffolders were like sections of an orchestra. They had to play in turn, in sequence, to produce the desired result. At the center was a conductor—the chief engineer. We wanted to differentiate this construction company from several others in the same business. The Boston Symphony Orchestra might play the same music as the Podunk Symphony Orchestra, but the end result, although similar, is not the same.

After obtaining footage of a regional symphony orchestra playing Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, I had the basis for a script. I also had the music for the sound track—heroic, dramatic, well known. I didn't have to buy the performance of the orchestra because I could buy a music library version of Beethoven and sync it up to the images of the players that we had permission to use. Once the metaphor was set up, it could run throughout the video and be turned on and off at will, ending with a great finale as the dramatic shots of the two towers from a distance were cut to the tutti of the Beethoven finale. At the end I got a shot of all the worker teams with tools in hand standing in and around a huge cooling duct 10 feet in diameter taking a sort of a bow as the sound track played the applause of the concert audience.



The video I wrote and directed for the Conseil Régional de Midi-Pyrénées in France uses visual metaphors. How do you explain that a region that is as old as Cro-Magnon man (whose drawings can be found in local caves), that has been inhabited by ancient Celtic peoples who raised stone monuments (dolmens) in ways that are beyond our understanding, that was conquered by Julius Caesar, and that is a traditional wine-growing region, is also a white-hot technological center of research and innovation in the aerospace and biotechnology fields? In the video, there is a shot of a traditional peasant in a beret tending his vineyard with a medieval village in the background. He looks up as a modern jet flies overhead leaving a trail. We cut to the Airbus assembly line in Toulouse (see the DVD). A visual language that can condense thought and make a point in pictures that is more succinct than words is what scriptwriters try to achieve.

Another device used to organize the multiple sections of the same video was to open the video with a computer screen on which titles appear as someone types on the keyboard. After each section, you return to the same device and introduce the next section.

Once you get a good metaphor going, it makes for strong structure and provides visual ways of communicating that use the medium with flair and imagination. The also-rans just do wall-to-wall voice-overs, which say “crane” on the sound track then show a shot of a crane. Every major word has an image to go with it that is controlled by the audio track. The whole video becomes predictable. It also becomes a struggle to find images that go with the commentary once you start. It is like a slide show with commentary. It results from writing the right-hand side of the script first—the classic mistake of the amateur. Never write the structure into the sound track when the medium is visual. The rare exceptions are documentaries in which the voice is important, say the voice of a historical character in a biography. The point is that you need a visual concept and a visual lead in a visual medium. Otherwise, you are not using the potential of medium.

A number of devices for video have basically been borrowed from program concepts evolved for television. Because the visual language of television has become a universal idiom of popular culture, writers and producers of corporate video know that their clients and their clients’ audiences will understand programs cast in that format. Some of these formats are broadcast news, the use of an anchor or presenter, documentary features, interviews, vox pops, quiz shows, and, from television advertising, testimonials.

#### *Narrators & Anchors On Camera*

Most factual or informational programs, whether news features or corporate videos, need some kind of narration. Although the use of voice-overs works some of the time, television producers have learned that audiences identify with people on screen. It is often more effective to have an on-camera anchor, presenter or narrator take the audience through the story, whether it is about global warming, a political situation in a foreign country, or a product launch. Broadcast news relies

on anchors to present the news. A great deal of experience has been accumulated about how to work with the camera so as to relate to an audience. These techniques differentiate the professional from the man on the street talking to a camera. Professionals know how to deliver lines to a camera and carry an audience. Sometimes, a simulated investigative documentary style can work well in corporate videos.

Shell Gas International is a company in the giant Shell group. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, their research side had developed a new catalyst that would allow natural gas to be turned into high-value lubrication oils and kerosene, which is jet fuel. There are huge reserves of natural gas in the world, much of it in underdeveloped countries, where it has no value. Natural gas is only valuable when it is near a large population that would justify the huge infrastructure of pipelines required to deliver it to the consumer. Investment in the research had reached \$100 million, including a working pilot plant in Amsterdam. The CEO of the operation wanted a video to explain the breakthrough and sell the technology to a key decision-making audience of oil ministers and petroleum engineers. There is a lot of archive footage in the Shell film and video library about everything they have done. More to the point, the story to be told was complex and had to persuade the target audience to entertain a joint venture involving a multimillion dollar investment. This all amounts to a very big communication challenge. How do you construct a video that will carry the story, integrate all of the available material, and be persuasive?

One of the main psychographic problems for the audience would be believing Shell promoting its own patented process. The success of the video depended on convincing the high-level audience that the process was cost-effective. The device that seemed to solve the communication problems and suggest a watchable video of tolerable length was to have an on-camera narrator reporting and explaining the story. In this way, an intermediary between the audience and Shell moderated the commercial propaganda. The audience would have a guide and a friend to take them through the story and make it into an exciting discovery like an investigative documentary. It would work because there was a story and because it was an interesting development in the history of petroleum chemistry. For decades numerous enterprises (including the Nazi regime during World War II) had tried to find a way to convert coal and natural gas into gasoline.

To create this script, the writer borrowed a device from broadcast television. The story opens with the anchor looking at video footage of natural gas being flared off in huge flames in a Middle Eastern oil field. Turning to the camera, he asks, "Why would anyone burn off natural gas and waste colossal amounts of energy?" He launches the program by asking, "What if there were a way to convert natural gas to liquid fuels and save this energy?" Roll title: *Natural Gas: The Liquid Alternative*. On-camera presenters are used in science documentaries, investigative news reports, historical documentary, and cultural series. The device is well understood and quite versatile because the narrator's voice can be run as audio only behind cutaways to location footage, archive material, and interviews.

*Creating a Loyal Client*<sup>6</sup> relies on a to-camera narrator as its fundamental strategy. The host in the script is sometimes on camera and sometimes off. His role is to persuade, cajole, and instruct the audience so that the corporate message is secure. This is a common strategy in corporate video. The host becomes a kind of interpreter for the audience and an insurance policy for the corporate client. It is a way of borrowing from the format of television shows whose audiences are accustomed to being led by the hand and carried through the show.

#### *Television Formats*

All of the television formats get used now and then as models for corporate video. The basic strategy is to use a small screen idiom that we know the audience will understand. It is a given that every audience knows television and has been culturally trained to accept its formats and conventions. Variety shows, quiz shows, interviews, documentary narrative, television news, sitcoms, how-to-do-it demonstration shows—all of these and more have been used in corporate videos.

How do you present retirement benefits to young employees who would be turned off by cold facts and figures? You present it as a television show with audience participation anchored by a young host who can make it sound acceptable to the target audience. This is what happens in *Check It Out* for Fidelity Investments. This program about the outwardly boring subject of benefits combines the TV show format with humor, and employee testimonials cunningly embedded in the variety format keep the message entertaining. Employees learn that benefits can make a significant difference in their lives later on.

#### *Documentary*

Another style of television documentary is the compilation documentary with an unseen narrative voice-over. This is common in wild life, historical, and reportage documentaries. Again, this device can be adapted to corporate narrative in all kinds of sales, public relations, and corporate image videos. Corporate histories and product histories are often quite involved and complex, especially when applied science is involved. Corporate messages can also involve economics and public policy. Businesses and nonprofits alike have a constant need to narrate, explain, and communicate factual information.

As you will remember from discussion in earlier chapters, American Express in Europe had spent a large sum on market research into American tourist destinations, preferences, and spending habits. The research revealed that Europe's market share was declining as Americans discovered Caribbean, Far Eastern, and domestic destinations. The demographic of the American tourist was changing. European tourist organizations and businesses were complacent about their market share. American Express, like other cards, charges the establishment accepting their card a percentage of the charge. Sometimes, restaurants and hotels resent having to pay this fee. A public relations opportunity existed for American Express to educate the member establishments and European tourist professionals and show the relationship as

a partnership. American Express had valuable marketing know-how, historical perspective, and worldwide experience. With frequent opportunities to interact with travel professionals at conventions and meetings, high-level management needed a vehicle to present this valuable marketing information for mutual benefit. After all, if American travel to Europe declines, so does the card business of American Express.

You could give the target audience printed copies of the market research. That approach is passive and would not profile the company. A good video, on the other hand, is an invaluable opener for meetings and also a useful internal communication that could reeducate European employees of American Express.

So what approach would carry off this communication? You are talking to professionals. You have complex marketing data to interpret. You have a PR function to perform. You have to achieve an informational and a motivational result. During my research visits, I found the attitudes of Europeans about American tourists to be not only complacent but patronizing, ignorant of the nature and breadth of American tastes and interests. There was a real need to shift the attitude of the audience and start them thinking. I came to the decision that one device was essential to the mix, to prove that the costly market research carried out by an outside contractor was accurate, by matching its categories up to testimonials from real American tourists.

### *Vox Pops*

Vox pops stands for *vox populi*, or “voice of the people” in Latin. This technique consists of sampling opinions on the street or some other location using unscheduled, random interviews. News reports often capture the unrehearsed opinion of the man-on-the-street. That is relatively easy to do. For the most part, a television audience sees edited excerpts. A lot of footage gets shot, but only a short sound bite is rolled into the broadcast. For a corporate video, and for American Express in particular, the interviews had to be authentic, unpaid, and unrehearsed in order to be convincing. It was a gamble—a creative gamble and a production gamble. I could not guarantee the availability of the mix of demographic types that governed the market research. These types were defined as Business Travelers, Big Spenders, Gray Panthers, and Adventurers.

Choosing to use vox pops would result in production problems and costs. The obvious place to capture interviews of American tourists was at the Heathrow Airport check-in lounge in late August or early September. At least a dozen flights a day departed Heathrow for U.S. destinations. Most of the passengers were likely to be returning summer tourists. Shooting in an airport, however, is costly. Airports demand facilities fees and also require you to insure yourself for several million dollars worth of public liability. The point to keep in mind as a writer is that although you can write the questions, you can only write in a paraphrase of what you hope the interviewees will say. The questions have to be well researched and well thought out. Whoever does the interviewing off camera has to have follow-up

questions and be able to get the subject to talk. Anyone appearing on camera has to sign a waiver that has been approved by the corporate legal department. Waivers are commonplace.

Basically, the technique is a strategic fishing expedition. You know something is out there. You try to use the right bait to catch it. Of course, anything that is not suitable can be edited out. However, you cannot make up material that is not genuine. In Chapter 5 we alluded to the use of this technique by AT&T. They ran a series of long-distance carrier ads based on the vox pops technique.

The fishing expedition in Heathrow Airport was successful. We had American Express personnel with clipboards canvassing the passengers to find out if they were American, if they would agree to be recorded, and if they had the time to be interviewed before their flights. Most people are pleased to express opinions on camera if given the right opportunity. This filter provided a steady trickle of American travelers to be interviewed on video. Afterwards, the interviewees were offered a refreshment and a small goodwill gift of an American Express calculator.



#### *Logical Argument in Documentary Narrative*

The American Express video combined a number of techniques: voice-over narrative, vox pops, and documentary narrative. Another commonplace technique that works well for corporate videos is an adaptation of documentary technique that could be called narrative argument. This technique requires voice narration to support it. It is based on editing images that have relevant content but are not usually shot in continuity or covered from different angles. Therefore, editing can only mean arranging the sequence of shots and deciding on their length. It is a basic form of visual exposition found in news features, documentaries, and corporate videos.

In the American Express video, we wanted to put forward an argument based on the extensive market research and economic statistics about trends in travel destinations and the impact on American tourism in Europe. This involved drawing conclusions about projected growth in long-haul destinations and the statistics about tourist spending to make the point that Europe could lose market share if the trend continued. To retain market share, action could be taken to satisfy the preferences of the principal types of American tourists as analyzed in the market research.

Documentary argument often works by using a metaphor of some kind. Earlier in the chapter, we explained how visual metaphor works. Corporate videos are often called on to make wide-ranging philosophical arguments about adapting to change, about understanding change, or about ecological vision or social policy. In *Sea Change*, produced for EMC<sup>2</sup> corporation, the message is about the impact of information technology in the business world as a way of introducing a company that makes storage disks and storage systems. The documentary metaphor about change becomes a platform for introducing the relevance of the product without a hard sell.



### Graphics

A strong way to represent statistical information visually is by means of graphs and charts. Effective graphics that are clear and colorful are a powerful means of communication for corporate videos. Today, computer graphics tools and animation software provide us with virtually unlimited capabilities at a reasonable cost. In the early days, computer graphic animation was a high-cost item in the budget because of the cost of hardware and software. Although costs have come down as computer processing power has become cheaper, animation can still be expensive. For instance, Industrial Light and Magic creates effects for feature films like *Titanic*, *Jurassic Park*, and *Star Wars* that are off the scale for corporate production. Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, and Infini-D enable low-cost desktop solutions that will get you a long way toward exciting graphics produced by high-end animations tools like Soft Image.

Corporate communications such as annual general reports and financial statements deal in facts and figures all the time. Graphics help get across statistics as in the familiar bar charts or pie charts. This is fine for Power Point presentations or print, but in a moving picture medium, you should animate the graphics. Even simple step frame animation will help, but we are still talking 2-D graphics. Now low- and high-end tools are available for all budgets to create 2-D and 3-D animation. This is particularly helpful for explaining a process. For example, the Shell video about natural gas had to explain the chemical process of catalysis to explain the innovation that Shell used to achieve the change in molecular structure. Good 3-D graphic animation can show how the complex long chain hydrocarbon molecule changes when it comes into contact with the catalyst.



### Visual Seduction

The television screen, or computer screen for that matter, is everywhere. It is a visual space on which all kinds of images, text, and scenes are projected. Some of it is ordinary, even banal. Some of it is visually stunning. Photographically powerful images captured on film by a skilled cinematographer compel attention and lift the medium to another level. Shots of nature or people can make the difference between something that passes before your eyes and something you watch with awe. This is a technique that is only minimally available to the writer and depends on the videographer and director to bring to the screen.

A writer can describe the intent and suggest the visual power of images. For example, exotic or dramatic locations often furnish the kind of breathtaking images that hold attention. These can be industrial images, such as a stunning crane shot, suspended from the cable of a crane turning around so that the camera pans the outside of the cooling tower of a nuclear power station under construction. The height and the point of view make it a compelling shot. Strong location visuals can be written in. *Natural Gas: The Liquid Alternative* required stunning shots of natural gas flaring off in the desert to make the point about wasting energy. The roar of this flame, like a jet engine, makes the point on the audio track. This type

of footage already existed as archive material in the Shell library, so it could be written in as a predetermined image in the final video. In *American Travel in Europe*, I chose to shoot in Ghent, Belgium, for the quaint period architecture and the canals. When the writer is also the director—frequently the case in corporate video production—location research is sometimes more efficient and more effective.

### *Interview*

Of all the documentary and corporate techniques, interviewing is the oldest and most basic way of capturing expert opinion. To support your point, you film a person answering questions that will illuminate the points you are trying to make. Usually we are accustomed to seeing the person speak to an off-camera interviewer so that the eyeline is to the left or right of camera. This distinguishes it from the to-camera presentation of an anchor. The news style delivery or confidential and personal delivery of someone speaking into the lens implies consciousness of the audience. It is by nature manipulative. When someone is observed by the camera speaking to an off-camera interlocutor, the statements come across as more authoritative and more objective. In *Natural Gas: The Liquid Alternative*, we interviewed the head of Shell Research to explain the breakthrough in catalysis. We interviewed the chief executive because of his vigorous, dynamic conviction about the future potential of the process. Although the point we wanted them to make was planned, it looks authoritative and objective, especially when it is seen in counterpoint to the to-camera anchor who takes us through the story.

### *Case Histories*

A more specific technique that may be made up of several interviews is the case history. As the name implies, this technique involves in-depth documentation of a personal story to illustrate an idea or a point. The case history can become the governing structural idea of a program. *Charley Wheeler's Big Week* for John Hancock is a fictional case history built around a dramatic character invented by the scriptwriter to illustrate all the points about how not to conduct yourself as a securities salesman. The case history is a very effective way to structure a corporate program when you want to bring together a number of points whose order is not as important as the context in which they are understood. Case histories work well because they are basically stories. The story structure takes precedence over the points you want to make. If you were to make the points in some kind of order, the audience would experience it as a glorified bullet list. Ideas that are abstract and hard to remember out of context become concrete and easy to remember in the context of a story. *Charley Wheeler's Big Week* has it both ways by creating a supplementary review video in which the points are recalled as the key points John Hancock wants to get across to its audience.



Consider the difference between explaining the way cholesterol lowering medication works and introducing the audience to a number of particular patients of different ages and types of lifestyle who have high cholesterol. You meet people. You get their story. In fact, even better, you do both. You provide case histories, and you have an animated graphic that explains how the blood chemistry works when arteries become clogged, how this produces angina or more critical heart attacks, and you use the same animation to show the intervention of the cholesterol lowering medication in reducing bad cholesterol. This makes another point, namely, that adopting one device or technique does not exclude another. In this case, you set up the problem with case histories. Then you educate the audience about heart disease. You sell the particular drug product indirectly by association. The same company might make a thirty second television spot that would sell the brand. The two uses of video are completely different.

### *The Story of a Day*

Sometimes a writer's material or the content that the client wants to see included is so disparate that none of the structures we have so far examined seems to work. Also we might be dealing with a process or a sequence of events that is time sensitive. A useful device is the slice through time, a unit of time, during which most of what you need to look at occurs. A company story can sometimes be nicely told in a day's activity. I used this technique in a script I wrote for the Saudi Aramco's Aviation Department. Finding, lifting, and refining petroleum is a 24-hour operation for an oil company. Aviation is vital to company operations. To explain how the aviation department affected every aspect of the operational day was part of the story. To summarize the structure and organization of the aviation department would have resulted in a deadly dull recitation of images and explanations that would soon pall. The diversity of information and activities, including the repair and maintenance of aircraft, pilot training, and transport, had no natural order. The answer to the scriptwriting problem was to show a 24-hour cycle in the operation. The idea was to cross-cut between a number of stories of flights in preparation. The preflight check runs on the sound track as you cut away to simultaneous activities in other areas. Meanwhile, on an oil platform, a helicopter delivers a relief crew. Shots of cargo being loaded, from mail to drill bits and spare parts, takes you into other stories. The clock becomes your narrative structure. At night, an executive Gulfstream flies an emergency mission to bring a pregnant woman with a breach baby from a remote site to a Dhahran hospital. Through this device, all of the different types of aircraft and missions can be covered in different locations.

In the final analysis, the corporate video has to tell a story. Whether the story is factual or fictionalized, it has to make a number of points. It has to convince an audience to respond to the informational, motivational, or behavioral objectives that we discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. In other words, the corporate video has to do a job, although it might entertain as a means toward that end.

## Writing Voice Commentary

Commentary takes up program time. Running time for a program can sometimes be critical, whether it is a PSA or commercial, a corporate promotion, or a documentary. It takes a long time in screen time to say things. Long-winded or overly detailed explanations can burden a program. Continuous commentary from beginning to end is tedious for the audience. It is always better to have pauses and rests in spoken sound track to allow music or natural sound to carry the program. A voice artist has to be well cast and well directed.

Most important of all, we must constantly remind ourselves that in visual media, visual communication through images is more effective than the spoken word. Any corporate or documentary program should work at some level without a sound track. It is a good test to view a program without commentary and to make it as effective as possible in purely visual terms. Voice commentary should complement the visuals and support them, but the structure of a program must derive from visual sequences, not from spoken commentary. Innumerable documentaries and corporate programs violate this principle. Writers, particularly those who are not professional scriptwriters, often write the commentary first and then add visuals to cover the commentary. The visuals become a kind of fill-in wallpaper. Do not write what we might call wall-to-wall commentary! If you catch yourself writing the right-hand column of a dual-column script first, the quality of your work will suffer. The best programs are always conceived as visual statements first and are driven by visual ideas. A commentary should be subordinate to the visual story.

## Selling Creative Ideas

When you write, you sell. All writing for corporate communications involves selling the creative ideas on which your communication is based. This means that not only must your ideas work for the medium but that they must also persuade the client who is stuck to the message like the tar baby in *Brer' Rabbit*. Many clients, indoctrinated with "corporate speak," have difficulty hearing any other voice or mode of communication. They are nervous about creative ideas that may dilute the pure message. They have difficulty seeing that their audience, even a captive employee audience, is not necessarily going to absorb and retain the message in its pure corporate form without some strategy of communication that gains audience assent. The creative strategies outlined in the previous section are what the writer works with to exploit the medium and reach the audience effectively.

Although our principal concern here is with writing, we should alert the beginner that most corporate writing involves presenting ideas in meetings—a form of pitching. Writers in this field need to be able to talk their ideas. They need to encapsulate them for the corporate client in such a way as to get this client to read

the treatment or the script with understanding and assent. They want the client to “buy” the script.

## Working with Budget Limitations

Every project has a budget. Even the grandest feature film has a budget. Cost is relative to length, location, and production values. Cost is paramount in corporate work. All corporate departments work with budgets. Audiovisual communications have to be designed and written within some kind of cost guidelines. Although in the learning stage one need not be hampered by cost, in professional work, creative ideas come with a price. If a creative solution is too ambitious and too costly, it will be rejected. Many corporate clients do not have discretion to spend more than a fixed figure. Often that figure is unrealistic for what they want. Every corporate producer has been in a meeting in which after finding out what the client wants, they learn that the money available to do the job is totally unrealistic. Compromises have to be worked out. Writers have to learn how to compromise and modify creative ideas and concepts based on the amount of money available.

## Conclusion

The corporate world makes liberal use of visual media to solve a wide range of communication problems, from marketing to external and internal public relations, promotion, brochures, service manuals, and training. Providing these solutions is big business for a large and diversified industry of media producers who employ writers to think through corporate communications problems and come up with creative solutions.

Corporate scriptwriting involves designing media messages on behalf of a client. All of the creative devices of the medium are potentially useful to this end. Working in the corporate field involves a contractual and consultative relationship that is unique. Corporate writing is typically dual-column format unless other formats work better. The non-broadcast industry is probably larger and more innovative than the broadcast industry. It is a highly creative and dynamic industry that is responsive to new technology and communications media. It offers more opportunities for employment than the entertainment industry.

## Exercises

1. Visit the admissions office of your college or university. Find out what the communication problems are with recruiting. Write a concept and treatment for an admissions video that would address those problems.

2. Contact the public relations or advertising department of a local company and find out if they have any corporate video needs. Submit a proposal to write a script for them.
3. Contact the public relations or advertising department of a local company and find out if they have made any corporate videos. Ask to see them and the script and see if you can get some background on the development of the project.
4. Find an organization on campus that you imagine needs a video. Interview them and design a video concept for them.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Charles Masser, "The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907," in *History of the American Cinema*, vol. 1, ed. Charles Harpole (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), p. 476.

<sup>2</sup>See the website of the Media Communication Association International at <http://www.mca-i.org/articles/mediapro.shtml>, an organization of media professionals who work in this area.

<sup>3</sup>Midi-Pyrénées: Nouveaux Espaces is represented by video clips in the DVD.

<sup>4</sup>See the DVD for a speculative proposal for such a conference.

<sup>5</sup>See Ray DiZazzo, *Corporate Scriptwriting, A Professional's Guide* (Boston: Focal Press, 1992); see also William J. Van Nostran, *The Scriptwriter's Handbook: Corporate and Educational Media Writing* (Boston: Focal Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup>*Creating a Loyal Client*, written by Peter Cutler for John Hancock.

## Training, Instruction and Education

# 7

Business, government, and the military all have vast training needs. Ever since television escaped from the broadcast television studio when Sony introduced a portable format in the form of 3/4-inch U-matic cassettes, organizations have seized on video to create standardized training modules. A visual medium lends itself to showing how to do things and to explaining procedures and behavior. In fact, many products are now sold with video manuals as well as printed manuals. Video is an instructional tool for educational and industrial training. Broadcast and cable television abounds in how-to-do-it shows about home maintenance, auto maintenance, cooking, gardening, and so on. With the dissemination of the VHS format and the consumer VCR, many different types of training and how-to-do-it videos are sold or rented to the general public, ranging from aerobic exercise videos to do-it-yourself videos. Here again is a vast market that needs writers, producers, and directors.

In the 1980s, attempts were made to make videotape interactive. The linear tape medium did not lend itself easily to this function because the time required to spool backwards and forwards to different sections of the tape took too long. With the advent of laser disks, first the 12-inch format, then the CD-ROM, and now the DVD, a real marriage between computers and audiovisual media became possible. Programs can be designed to be interactive so that the user input is made part of the program concept. This nonlinear interactive structure lends itself perfectly to training needs. Self-paced learning can accommodate all learners. It allows tracking of performance and effective testing. That same interactivity is now accessible on web sites over the Internet. What used to be exclusively linear video now becomes a component of multimedia that demands a different kind of conceptualizing and writing. Further discussion of writing for interactive media can be found in Part IV.

Finding out whether a writer's idea for a corporate video is right or wrong can be an expensive business. Training and instructional programs are different because the

desired end result can be closely defined, and then tested or measured. Therefore, the content can be evaluated in a controlled way. Evaluation is a crucial part of the writing process. Evaluation comes in two kinds: formative and summative.

#### *Formative Evaluation*

Formative evaluation is a process of evaluation that takes place before committing resources and time to a project. The word “formative” suggests that it is part of the forming or shaping process. There are a number of techniques, both formal and informal, that you can apply to your writing. The most accessible one is to make up a questionnaire, and to use its answers to guide you to the content of the program. If you want to make a video about parallel parking, you would ask people to reveal what they find difficult about it, what their fears are, how they learned to do it, and what they think would be useful to see in a video.

#### *Summative Evaluation*

“Summative” is a word, like formative, that derives from a latin root. The word sum, or total, is related. The “summation” of arguments at the end of a trial is similarly derived. So we understand that this evaluation takes place at the end of the process of communication to see whether the message worked as planned. The process tries to verify whether the objectives defined at the outset were met and whether the intended message is being effectively received by the target audience.

Formative and summative evaluations work in tandem. What you find out in the first evaluation becomes the basis for the second. Sometimes, they can be used independently and serve a purpose. Normally, though, one leads to the other. If you ask formative questions about parallel parking to define what you would show in your video, you would then want to ask the audience whether they understood how to parallel park after viewing the video. The message sent is not always the message received, hence the elaborate exercise to test whether your intention is working as planned. For a production company and its client, success or failure has commercial consequences. Formative and summative evaluation is a sort of insurance policy. You might think of a carpentry analogy. You measure your wood before cutting it. You check the result afterwards to see if it is right.

Media communication is an inexact science. Any way of stacking the odds in your favor to achieve a successful result is highly desirable. Numerous techniques have been developed in the advertising and public relations industry to ensure the success of campaigns for specific publics. Formative and summative evaluation rest on many techniques that work equally well to assess training needs.

## Focus Groups

A focus group is a hand-picked group of people who represent a cross section of your target audience and who have agreed to participate in the evaluation process.

This might involve questionnaires, meetings, and discussions with a view to collecting detailed responses about a product, a service, or the effectiveness of the message. Most formative and summative evaluation works best with focus groups. It is advantageous to measure hypothetical responses and actual responses with the same group of people. It would not be hard to do an evaluation exercise with a focus group in a college environment.

## Questionnaires

Questionnaires can be used on their own without a focus group to conduct formative or summative evaluations. A good questionnaire is an efficient way to collect information about the audience and its attitudes. In an informal way, every writer asks and answers questions about the target audience. A formal questionnaire, however, needs to be designed to elicit specific results and eliminate faulty assumptions. At the high end, this requires training. Polls and research into public attitudes on given issues is a specialized field.

## Traditional Devices for Training Videos

In Chapter 6, we saw how corporate video scripts are organized around a number of structural devices that help to organize content and keep the audience's interest. Some of these can be used in training videos. Dramatization and case histories are also good ways to get across training content. The older training videos tend to be very basic and of the show-and-tell type or task description type. There are a few formats that are perhaps more typical of training videos.

## Show and Tell

The most basic tried-and-true technique is called show and tell because that is what it does. Most writers have been pushed into doing one of these. The military and government agencies traditionally relied on this approach to reach a broad common denominator. If you want to teach hundreds or even thousands of recruits how to change the caterpillar tracks on a tank, you need to simplify the job into a number of separate, clear tasks. As the phrase "show and tell" suggests, the technique is to show on screen how to do something and then explain what you are seeing in a voice-over on the sound track. Many training tapes go on for thirty or forty minutes and are unwatchable for anyone but the trainee who needs the instruction to pass a qualification. The show-and-tell technique is usually a standardized demonstration captured on video. A talking head introduction and a conclusion are typical of this kind of program, which is particularly useful and cost effective for training tasks

that have to be repeated, and are subject to variations in quality and style at each session depending on the instructor. A video training tape standardizes the content and the quality of delivery. This is important whenever a large volume of trainees is involved. Interactive modules created for a computer and stored on a drive or a disk now provide an alternative to video and have more versatile applications.

The learning of a task can often be packaged in a show-and-tell videotape. Maintenance—changing tank tracks, servicing a motor, or testing electrical circuits, for instance—is a good example. Learning how to drive a car or a forklift, or to back a truck into a loading bay, or how to sell a product are other examples. How-to-do-it videos are really training videos that the general public buys or rents from video stores. They include cooking, exercise routines, or gardening topics. They use the visual medium to show by means of a moving picture what would have to be described at length and be difficult to follow in print. Many television shows are based on the show-and-tell technique. The difference is that there is an anchor or presenter who is generally a personality of some kind, whether it is a celebrity chef showing us how to make a soufflé or some other personality showing us how to install storm windows or remodel a kitchen.

In all of these programs, the common thread is that the subject matter, the content, is primary. An audience is going to be watching because it is interested in the subject matter per se, either because they want to be or, in the case of corporate training, they have to be for their jobs. This kind of video does not always demand highly creative or imaginative use of the medium. How many ways can you show someone changing a spark plug? It does, however, require clear thinking and good organization of the material.

On a number of occasions, this writer has dealt with clients who wanted basic training videos and resisted all creative innovation. Once the client representative said that, because the audience was paid to watch the video, they didn't need anything creative or fancy. This thinking is mistaken because, even though an audience may be obliged to watch the video as part of a job responsibility, there is always a motivation factor. You can oblige someone to sit in a room and be present for a screening, but you cannot control his mental attention. The person's mind can wander. You cannot stop someone from dozing off in a darkened room after lunch. You cannot control message retention by force-feeding someone a video. There is always a virtue in creative, thoughtful scripting that works to hold the audience's attention and improve message retention by imaginative use of the medium.

## Job and Task Description

Most training concerns learning how to perform jobs. Jobs are broken down into tasks. The distinction is important. A task is specific, identifiable, and short. If you were dealing with driving a car, starting the car would be a task. Parallel parking would be another task. Several tasks in a sequence add up to a job. A job is

then an undertaking that leads to a terminal action that completes the defined end objective. Many training videos are broken down into tasks and organized around task description.

## Devices that Teach and Entertain

The challenge with a training video is to hold the audience while a great deal of information is delivered in such a way that the audience retains it. Sometimes the way companies use training video sinks the medium like an overloaded vessel. Because the medium is linear, it is hard to retain information beyond a certain amount. The writer's skill is to create a device that gets the information across while keeping the audience's attention. A number of devices can do this. Most of them involve pretending that the training task is, for example, a game, a television show, or a story.

## Dramatization

Dramatization means creating characters and situations that embody the training points. A safety training video might use serious drama to make a point about the consequences of ignoring safety procedures in a factory or a warehouse. Many other kinds of training programs make use of comic drama. John Cleese, of *Monty Python* fame, cofounded Video Arts to exploit the situation comedy format to make management training films that are entertaining and instructive. The company has been very successful. Learning how to close a sale or interview a job applicant by watching John Cleese caricature how not to do it is an unforgettable experience. An omniscient voice-over watching this tells him what he is doing wrong and he replays the scene the correct way. Comedy captures the audience's interest. The errors and mistakes are hilarious to watch. The audience laughs at them and, of course, at their own errors. They are softened up to receive the training point about how to carry out some management function the right way. Job done!

The same approach is adopted in *Charley Wheeler's Big Week*, which teaches securities sales personnel the rules and regulations of the Securities and Exchange Commission. The wrong behavior and key infractions of regulations are dramatized in a character named Charley Wheeler. A training video is an invaluable aid that pays for itself many times over. Fidelity has a legal obligation to train its people. *Charley Wheeler's Big Week* employs humor from time to time as well as dramatizing the message. We get a smile out of Charley's obvious lies and subterfuges.

It is more memorable to show a fictional character who does everything wrong than to explain what is right. A fictional character provides the writer with a great deal of license. It also means that the audience can laugh at a scapegoat or see faults that might be harder to acknowledge in a factual recitation. *Charley Wheeler's*



*Big Week* tells a moralizing tale of malpractice by creating a fictional securities salesman who is careless about SEC rules and regulations. It would be awkward, if not impossible, to use real case histories as examples of how not to sell, or how not to follow Securities and Exchange Commission rules of conduct, to drive home the importance of regulation in the mutual fund industry.

When you have a lot of information to convey, you can deliver it as factual documentary narrative: “You must do this, you mustn’t do that.” In other words, you could create a video lecture. The writer of *Charley Wheeler’s Big Week* instead chose to organize the points within a moral tale of what not to do as a mutual fund salesman. The fact that we meet Charlie in the lower grade job of short-order cook after he has been barred from the securities industry for violating its professional codes makes sure that we, the audience, see the story from the correct ethical perspective. Clearly, the audience are trainees and salespeople in the mutual fund industry. They are given a fall guy to explore all the do’s and don’ts from a safe emotional position. This is a common and useful technique. The character is recognizable. He may even have a bit of us in him. However, we can laugh at him, despise him, look down on him as a loser while at the same time realizing that there’s a Charley lurking in all of us somewhere if we let him have space. It is usually more effective to dramatize a situation that allows your message to be sent via emotional attitudes or through character conflict than deliver a straight exposition. An audience is more inclined to give its attention to dramatic treatments and to remember the points more easily than from a recitation of do’s and don’ts. (Read the script and see video clips from *Charley Wheeler’s Big Week* on the DVD.)



## Educational/Instructional Use of Video

Education is a universal preoccupation. Overhead projectors are still a popular presentation tool for educators. Now computer presentation software such as PowerPoint allows bulleted points and headings to be spiced up with graphic objects, audio, and video. The computer has basically subsumed the role of a slide projector when coupled to an LED projector. Slides can be stored as picture files and called up as needed. A training program can be stored as a computer file and called up for live presentations. There is a role for writers in serious slide presentations for training.

All companies have training needs. In every field, technology and the constant evolution of ideas means that employees need to be retrained and their knowledge and skills upgraded. Companies also need to train new hires who may have an inadequate education or who need knowledge about the company’s products, history, policies, and benefits. Such training needs are ongoing.

In educational institutions from grade school through college, there is a constant need to acquire information, learn methods, and supplement classes or lectures. The advent of video in cheap portable formats opened up a vast educational video

market. Live lectures can be recorded and replayed, which is the simplest application. Video can be produced on specialized topics, such as the study of an artist, an historical figure, or a social issue. Videos containing extraordinary images, archival material, or interviews, which are scripted and shot with an organized structure, offer valuable extensions to the classroom lecture technique and standard textbooks traditionally used for teaching. Most students have seen this kind of educational documentary during their careers.

Most college libraries now have a significant video collection almost as diverse as their book collection. The only differences between a television documentary and an educational documentary is probably length (since there is no scheduled slot to fit into) and subject matter. Television documentaries have to appeal to a general viewing audience. Educational documentaries can presume some background knowledge and can be more specialized.

## How-to-do-it Videos

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then showing an audience how to do something is the best example of it because explaining in words is nearly always long and often ambiguous. Everybody has had the experience of trying to follow written directions to assemble a piece of furniture or the operating instructions of an appliance, not to mention the instructions for a piece of computer software. For many retail items needing instruction, it is neither practical nor economical to provide a video manual. However, more expensive goods or services do sometimes come with a video manual. There is a commercial market for videos that show you how to do things: cooking, gardening, house repairs, exercise routines, and even how to make love. Although many are offshoots of television shows, plenty of videos are made specifically for this market. Video rental stores have a small section devoted to them. You see them advertised in magazines, sold by mail order, and promoted through infomercial programs on cable television.

## Interactive Applications

Interactive training came into its own with the invention of the laser disk. A computer interface with instant access to 50,000 frames of information made nonlinear instructional design a practical reality. The CD-ROM, successor to the 12" laser disk, has now largely been replaced by the DVD. Authoring software has been created that enables sophisticated interactive multimedia design. The ultimate medium for training is now interactive. Individuals absorb knowledge at different rates. Interactive media now allow self-paced learning. Computer-based training enables testing and scoring of individual performance. Authoring software allows the instructional

designer to create feedback loops that not only foster self-paced learning but oblige the user to complete a test or learning module before proceeding.

Nevertheless, there is still room for the linear training video. One reason is that it costs much more to design and program a complex interactive training program than to produce a videotape. This cost is not justified unless the training program will have long life and numerous copies will be needed by a large audience. If training content changes rapidly or has a small audience, linear videotape can do a useful job of instruction at low cost in conjunction with print manuals. Lucent Technologies adopted this solution to facilitate installation of light wave multiplexers for which I wrote a couple of scripts of this very kind.

The fastest growing application for training is online, using real time synchronous and asynchronous sharing of information to an unlimited audience who can log on to a website. Microsoft is promoting its meeting software, NetMeeting. More interesting is a tool like Macromedia Breeze, which allows video, audio and white board synchronous communication and as well as asynchronous stored media such as stills and video for later access. So increasingly, video will become an asset to be produced for uploading to a more versatile, interactive environment, either on fixed media or on websites. The traditional instructional video will dwindle in value.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we learned that writing training programs involves specific goals that can be more closely measured and defined through techniques of formative and summative evaluation. Training and educational needs usually involve explaining or demonstrating an operation or a process. Media solutions deliver standardized content that meets agreed objectives. The scripts are usually written in a dual column format like their corporate cousins. Imaginative devices are still a valuable part of the writer's repertoire to communicate how to perform a task or improve performance. The corporate need for training is virtually inexhaustible. Its needs are increasingly met by interactive instructional media, which are the subject of Chapters 13 and 14.

## Exercises

1. Write a short training video for a simple task such as tying a tie, parallel parking a car, or cooking an omelet. This should include a short formative and summative evaluation.
2. Write a plan for a formative evaluation for a college recruitment video. Use an existing such video to do a summative evaluation. Optional: Put a focus group together to do the evaluations.
3. Write a task description of a familiar activity, say, brushing your teeth.

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4. Go to the training department or human resources department of a local company and find out if they have any training needs. Try to get information so that you can write a script for them.
  5. Go to the training department or human resources department of a local company and find out if they have any training videos. Ask to see them and find out as much background as you can about their development.
  6. Make a list of visual metaphors to explain situations or problems, for example: driving, rules of the road, conflict resolution, using a piece of machinery.

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## Documentary and Nonfiction Narratives

# 8

### Documentary Comes First

Everybody has seen a documentary. The documentary is an important program format that has roots in photography and painting. If you think about it, the most fundamental urge we have is to record reality. Some twenty-five thousand years ago in the south of France, Cro-Magnon man struggled to document the fauna of his world on the walls of caves. There are no portraits of the painters of those exquisite rock drawings. At the site of Pèch Merle in France, there is, however, a pre-historic signature in the form of an outline of a human hand. The need to record ourselves in the form of an image is central to all cultures, whether on Greek pottery or temple friezes, Roman coins or Egyptian obelisks. The portrait is our most intimate documentary. For centuries, painters have been commissioned to create likenesses of people for public display, for family, or for posterity. Much of this function has been assumed by photography since the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We have a photograph of Abraham Lincoln. We only have paintings of George Washington. We take our own photographs of friends and family. In this respect, we are all documentarians. What is our objective? We want to record reality so that someone else can experience that moment either with us or without us at a later moment.

The first moving picture documentary was inspired by a \$25,000 bet—a tidy sum in its day. The challenge was to prove that a horse either does or doesn't lift all four legs off the ground at a full gallop. In the 1870's, Edward Muybridge rigged up a system of trip wires so that a galloping horse would release the shutter on a line of still cameras as it passed.<sup>1</sup> In this way, he could prove that a horse lifts all four legs off the ground and does not keep one hoof in touch with the ground as his adversary maintained (see Figure 8.1). What could be more essentially documentary than that?

Others, including Thomas Edison, worked on capturing motion. With his invention of motion picture film, what excited the first movie audiences was seeing



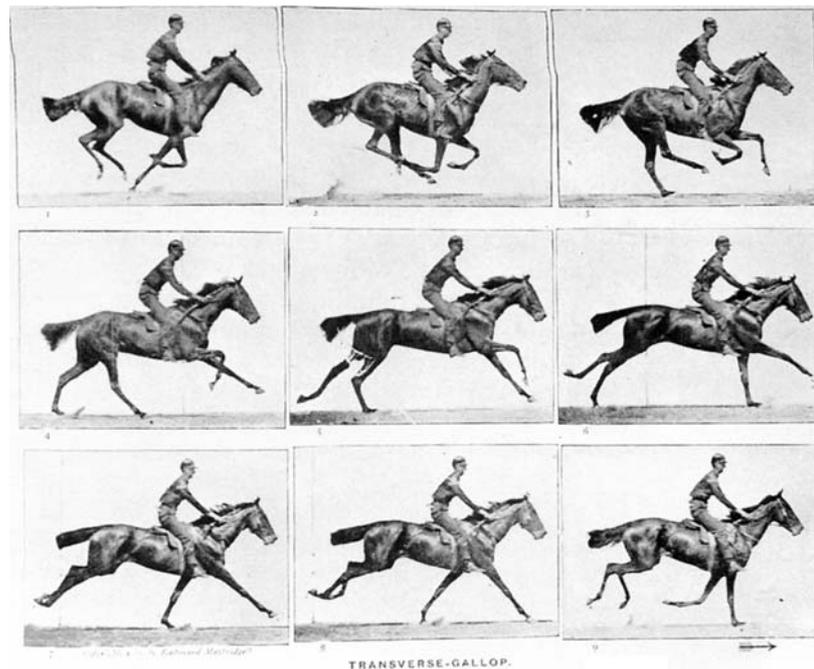


Figure 8.1 “The Horse in Motion” photographed by Edward Muybridge in 1875.

realistic shots of phenomena—a train rushing towards camera, which gave a feeling of such realism that the audience ducked in fear of being hit. The same phenomenon was repeated in 3-D movie experiments in the 1950’s and 1960’s. I remember going to a Cinerama film and seeing a shot of a lion jumping at the camera which gave the audiences of that day a thrill such that we all screamed and ducked. If you have ever been to an IMAX theater, you will find the same psychology applies. The huge wrap around screen on which a 70 mm film image is projected creates a very realistic experience of “being there.” I remember feeling dizzy watching a shot from an ultra-light plane flying over the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls or some other spectacular landscape. Not many dramatic fiction films are made in this format because of the cost.

The first attempts to make moving pictures were documentary. Dramatic storytelling uses of the medium came later. In reality, however, the documentary format in film, video, or television also narrates stories, but of a factual kind. Early documentary film makers, such as John Grierson and Robert Flaherty, were, in a sense, reporters. Film quickly became a news medium, and television continued the use of the moving image to convey reports of people, places, and events.

Recently, as happens from time to time, some documentary films have been distributed as theatrical feature films competing with fictional dramas and comedies.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences awards Oscars for both short and long documentary films; *Bowling for Columbine* won in 2003 in the feature length category. *Spellbound* (2002) documents the agonies of children competing for the prize in the Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee. Then there is an extraordinary wildlife film, *Winged Migration* (2001), that allows us to fly along with migrating geese and cranes and know the life of birds that fly thousands of miles to seasonal feeding and nesting grounds. Others like *Touching the Void* (2004), a re-enacted documentary of surviving a climbing accident, and *The Endurance: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition* (2000) can command theatrical audiences because they are extraordinary tales of human endurance. Another personal documentary essay by Michael Moore, *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), generated political controversy and also a record breaking box office for the genre.

Even though some documentaries may be shot on film, it is risky and expensive to distribute them on film. However, recent history suggests people will buy a ticket to see these documentaries projected as films in a theater. We conclude that the desire to know reality or be told about reality is an abiding need of film and television audiences. With time, DVDs and the World Wide Web will probably become more important to the dissemination of documentaries.

Despite these successes, television remains the main distributor of documentary programs. Most documentary film makers look to television to commission or buy the broadcast rights of their work. With its inexhaustible appetite for documentary material that communicates information, explains ideas, or records history, television and cable have kept the tradition alive. Now we have television news features and whole channels more or less devoted to documentary programming. The Discovery Channel, A&E, and the History Channel come to mind. PBS, especially WGBH in Boston, is a consistent producer of documentary series, carrying on a great tradition that originated with early producers of 16 mm film documentaries. They produce some of the best documentaries on television. *American Experience* tries to capture uniquely American people, places, and events. *Nova* documents new discoveries and new thinking in science. *Frontline* is a current affairs program that addresses contemporary social, political, and ethical issues. You could also argue that the sports channels are, in a sense, documentary channels because they show you real games. Perhaps the most basic documentary function of television is performed by C-SPAN, which records senate hearings and public events, debates, and so on.

There is, however, an important difference with real time, live broadcasts. They are not scripted. Could you script the progress of the World Series or the Super Bowl? They record an event as it happens. Even the sports commentator or announcer adlibs his broadcast. No writers are needed. This is an important distinction since we are now proposing to examine the role of the script writer in the documentary form and learn how it is done. How does the writer approach documentary? What is the role of the script? How do you write for documentary that is different from writing sitcoms, movies, or writing broadcast news?

## Truth or Fiction

Let us think about the word itself: documentary. Obviously we recognize the word “document” in it. Its root is the Latin word *documentum*. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), its first appearance in English is close to the Latin, meaning a teaching, an instruction, or a warning. Later, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the meaning shifted to mean something that is written or inscribed that furnishes evidence, such as a deed or a contract. The growth of trade made documents important. A ship’s manifest would show who owned the cargo. Hence a document is a record of something that establishes a fact. Then it becomes a verb, to document, meaning to establish the truth, furnish the evidence. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 1802, the OED records the use of documentary as an adjective, meaning that something consists of documentary evidence. Only with the invention of the documentary film does the adjective then become a noun that is shorthand for this type of film.

So documentary contains the idea or intention that it is evidence establishing a fact, that it is telling the truth. This raises all sorts of interesting problems. For instance, the video footage on the news is supposed to be truthful reportage. That is our expectation, but it is not always so. Shots can be staged, and sometimes are. Shots are framed for effect. We do not see what is behind the camera or outside the field of view of the lens. The footage is also edited. A point of view is contained in it and imposed on it. Nevertheless, we expect the truth. If a documentary is about an expedition to climb Mount Everest or reveals the life of a pride of lions in the Serengeti, we expect it to be a truthful account. Documentary scholars and theorists argue about the relationship between truth and reality. For instance, to be controversial, ask whether a pornographic website that shows live sexual activity is truthful. Is it reality? Perhaps it is real but not truthful because it is performed, even though it may involve real sexual acts. It is easy to confuse actuality with reality, and actuality in behavioral documentary is not necessarily reality because of the presence of the camera or because of the cultural differences between the observer and the observed.<sup>2</sup>

The name of the genre suggests an action of documenting a factual story in moving and still pictures. It can be a story of a person, an historical period, an historical event, an animal species, a work of art, or any other topic of investigation. The essence of the documentary form is that it attempts to tell or show the truth in its totality. This commitment to recording reality can result in shocking or disturbing material. Georges Franju, in *Le Sang des Bêtes* (1949), makes us look at the hidden horror of slaughter houses. Alain Resnais, a French director, made a famous documentary *Nuit et Brouillard* (“Night and Fog”, 1955), which was probably the first attempt to reflect on the horror of Nazi concentration camps. The allied armies that liberated the camps had documentary film units that recorded the first images of that horror. The power of images to show the truth makes visual media compelling and persuasive. On the other hand, the same power can be devoted to fabricating falsehood and propaganda. Leni Riefenstahl’s Nazi propaganda film, *Triumph*



*of the Will* (1934), commissioned to commemorate Hitler's Nuremberg rally, is a masterful use of the medium.

That is why we should consider whether all nonfiction narrative is documentary, even though all documentary is nonfiction narrative. We have to distinguish between telling a true story and a story about historical events, which is based on the truth. A dramatized documentary tells a story of real people and real events but by inventing scenes and employing actors to portray what the writer imagines could have happened. The line between truth and fiction becomes blurred. If we cross the line completely, we end up with a biopic, as it is called in *Variety*-speak. Truth takes a back seat to entertainment. Documentary is still narrative, but narrative which is dedicated to telling the story of history.

Remember that the word "story" comes from the Latin word for "history." "Story" and "history" often overlap. The Old Testament and the New Testament tell stories, but some consider them to be history. Cultures tend to convert history into stories that become more compelling than the real thing. For example, the Boston tea party is both a story and an historical event, as is the ride of Paul Revere. Sometimes, the story becomes more important than the history, as is the case with the ride of Paul Revere. In history, he rode to Lexington; in legend, according to the poem of Longfellow, he rode to Concord.

How do you construct a documentary idea? How do you tell the truth in a visual narrative? True representation of something rests on knowledge. Knowledge rests on research. Research takes many forms. It can be picture research, location research, factual research, background research, interviews with people, or historical research. Until you have done that work, you cannot meaningfully write down a treatment or outline for a documentary production.

Of course, you get an idea for a documentary based on an insight, a supposition, or a hunch that there is a truth to reveal about something. It could be commonplace, such as what happens to a letter once you post it, or something unusual or exotic, such as the story of an expedition. We still call this a concept. It is an idea that guides your thinking, your research, and your discussion with producers and editors of program formats. Once you have a concept, you have to research it.

We say that seeing is believing. The scriptwriter should understand that film and television are media that are made by editing footage in postproduction. They are assembled shot by shot according to a script or a vision of the maker. Because editing involves choice—choice of what to leave in and what to cut out—the editorial point of view can be biased. So documentary is not necessarily objective truth. It can be an argument against war or for the environment. Its point of view may be partisan and consciously adopted by the maker. Wherever the camera is pointed, some things are excluded while others are included. Camera placement on location and editing choices in the cutting room determine the final result.

Documentaries fall broadly into two types according to their point of view. There is objective documentary and point of view documentary. The first strives to be a record of true observation, showing things as they are. It is the most difficult

because the production method so often alters the reality in front of the lens. The latter is an examination of factual matter but from a point of view that is declared. An example of the latter would be Michael Moore's documentaries.

Usually, the point of view is imparted by the director. This is why documentary is primarily a director's medium. The writer, if independent of the director, is not going to have as strong an influence on the final shape of the program, for the obvious reason that the shooter chooses the images and frames the shot. Because the writer is subordinate to the director, documentaries are often made by writer/directors who can carry through their intentions from script to shooting, and, finally, in the cutting room. The general public is not really aware of how the medium of film and video can be manipulated in postproduction, or how the person looking through the viewfinder chooses the frame, which once again includes and excludes objects or people in front of the camera. Both of these actions constitute a form of continuous visual editing that imposes a point of view. It can easily be abused—and often is—in news reporting to create more dramatic footage.

For this reason, true documentary is a noble form because it seeks to reveal the truth about a subject. Being truthful can be compatible with expressing a point of view, just as, in print journalism, editorial opinion can be stated in conjunction with factual reporting. The important point is to make a clear distinction between fact and opinion, or between the camera as an observation device and the camera as an editorial device manipulating what the audience is allowed to see.

## Scripted and Unscripted Approaches

Most directors shoot unscripted documentaries. Such productions can be undertaken on the basis of a treatment expressing the idea or intention of the documentary. Wildlife documentary is particularly unlikely to be scripted before shooting because you don't know what you are going to get until you shoot it. You cannot script moves for a pride of lions or plan what a gorilla will do. You just keep shooting and, very often, acquire footage of opportunity that could never have been planned. You can and must script a reconstruction of the assassination of President Lincoln.

Documentaries can be divided into two broad categories: those that are highly researched and structured, and those that are observational or a filmed record of things as they happen. Historical and biographical documentary tends to need scripting to establish a structure and a narrative order. Like any production, a documentary script has to be broken down into sequences and shot lists and then budgeted. If you need a certain shot or an archive picture, that location or that photo has to be researched, found, and rights or permission obtained. This all adds up to cost. Therefore, the greater the detail of your script, the better you can plan the shoot and control the budget. All scripts, for every format, are an exercise in efficiency. If you know what you are going to shoot, you can organize better and

limit shooting things on the spur of the moment that may ultimately have no use. On the other hand, shots of opportunity often occur on location, and a good director knows when to improvise or grab an unforeseen opportunity. It comes down to simple pragmatism. It is worth paying a writer or spending the time writing a script or plan of what you are going to shoot in order to save money. If we recall the blueprint analogy, we can remind ourselves that construction is the expensive part. So scripts save production costs, just as drawing up accurate building plans saves construction costs.

## Research and Formulating a Theme

Factual background, location research, and picture research are also necessary when creating a documentary. They are specialized services that are often independent of the writer. Research is based on reading background, on interviews with experts, on site visits, and on archives of both still and moving pictures. From the research, a writer can establish what material exists, find a theme, and choose a way of organizing the narrative exposition. To undertake research without some kind of formulated project that is acceptable to an eventual buyer involves risk. The expense of time and money might not lead to production. Initial research might be enough to establish the topic or theme. Serious research enabling a script to go forward would then be part of any budget.

Research means, above all, picture research. It is no good writing in a shot of Sigmund Freud analyzing a patient on his couch if either the picture doesn't exist or the rights to the picture cannot be acquired or are too expensive. Picture rights are a huge part of documentary budgets. Therefore, a writer must write around the images that are available. If an archive image is not available, then a location shot of, say, a historical place such as a Civil War battlefield could be substituted. That means a location shoot with all the attendant expenses. Another alternative is to write in a dramatized reenactment. This means spending production money on actors, costumes, and sets. Every solution costs money. A writer has to write a visual narrative that is based on known resources as far as possible. At the same time, the story has to be credible and substantial. It is always very tempting to carry the story in words rather than visuals. Ultimately, the program will fail if it becomes commentary heavy. Research empowers the writer to write intelligently, exploiting the resources in a judicious way while keeping the program alive.

Sometimes, a documentary is made because of the discovery of new material. After the dissolution of Soviet Russia, a whole new film archive about World War II was discovered in Russia shot from the Russian point of view. The archival material itself warrants a documentary, even though other documentary series about World War II already exist. This type of documentary, based on the compilation of existing footage linked by narration, is very common. Obviously, writing this kind of script depends on viewing the archive footage and arranging it in some kind of order with

a narrative voice-over and some selected interviews. It makes the writer into an editor. Indeed, an editor is like a writer who writes directly on the screen with the available images that have made it to the cutting room.

## What is the Role of the Writer?

At this point, we can understand that the role of the writer can be different for different types of documentaries. Writing is largely restricted to the development phase for other types of media writing but is co-existent with production and post-production for documentary. Writing is critical for two preproduction documents. The first is a Proposal. The second is the Treatment. Then in postproduction the writer returns to write voice over narration. Only dramatized documentary, in which real events are reconstructed or historical characters are portrayed, is fully scripted because you need settings, action and dialogue.

### *The Proposal*

The proposal is the deal maker. Like all media content, documentaries cost money. Typically, they are financed by pre-sales to channels for certain rights. The proposal or concept sets out the idea of the documentary, the potential and the promise. Essentially, a distributor such as a television network, here or abroad, buys the idea with a promise to make payment on delivery for a specific number of broadcasts in a specific territory over a specified time. All documentaries have an element of unpredictability. Therefore, the proposal and the proposer are all that the network has to go on. The proposal matters because it will lead to the Treatment.

### *The Treatment*

We know what a Treatment is from previous chapters, and for a documentary it is not really different except that it is probably the final document before production. Unless there is reenactment or dramatized narrative, there is no way to script a scene you don't know you are going to get. The importance of the treatment is to organize the structure and the argument of the documentary and the intended sequence of visuals. It should also establish its point of view. The Treatment could also be a scene outline that would identify locations and interview subjects.

## Types of Documentary Technique

There are a number of recognizable documentary techniques in use today. Sometimes they are combined, just as techniques of corporate video are. However, on the whole they tend to work better when a consistent style is maintained throughout. What follows are simply commonsense definitions meant to help us discriminate between different types of writing. They have no formal standing.

### *Reportage*

This is a French word meaning, literally, “to bring back.” The journalist, writer or filmmaker brings back information that gives an account of an event. Because reportage involves telling the story as you find it, it is really a contradiction to write down shots you plan to shoot or things you plan to see. There is an implicit understanding that you will record what you see as you see it. Writing is primarily going to take place in postproduction in the form of commentary.

### *Observation*

The camera can be used as an observing eye from within the environment in order to introduce the audience to an unfamiliar world. As a general rule, the camera and its crew intrude in the world that is being recorded. People react to the camera. The crew, even a crew of one, is a presence that is not part of the environment. The camera disturbs the environment it is trying to record. Therefore, it cannot observe the natural behavior of subjects. If you put a camera into a classroom, it will be difficult for the students not to be aware of the camera and, as a result, they will probably change their behavior. The same would be true for, say, a prison, a street gang, or a family. It is a challenge to a certain kind of documentary filmmaker to approach human environments somewhat like a wildlife photographer. The technique is to introduce the camera and wait until people are used to it and forget about it. They can then render the camera neutral. Flaherty's documentary about Eskimos, *Nanook of the North* (1922), has attracted controversy because he can be accused of staging actions and behavior for the camera. This kind of documentary is basically constructed in the cutting room. In this silent film, there is no commentary. Other documentaries of this kind have to be post-scripted after the footage has been recorded.

### *Interviews*

Whether an interview serves as research prior to actual production or whether it is going to be filmed as footage for inclusion in the edited documentary, successful interviewing underpins every documentary. The question may not appear in the final edit. Audio only of the answers can also be used for commentary voice over. Interviews are based on questions and answers to those questions, which might be recorded on camera or off. There are a number of types of questions, each with a different purpose and usefulness in the interview process:

- 1 Open questions allow the interviewee to volunteer information, to express opinions and to get warmed up. For example: *What is the most exciting aspect of your job? How did you get interested in the reproductive life of sub-Saharan scarab beetles? Or, what do you like to do in your spare time?* Questions that ask who, what, when, where, why, or how typically lead to open questions.
- 2 Closed questions generally have a limited choice of answers. *Do you like caviar?* The answer can only be yes or no. Logically, it could also be, *I don't*

know, if, for example, you haven't tasted it. In legal cross-examination and police interviewing, closed questions play an important part in pinning down the facts. *Did you see the victim on the night of . . . ?* Closed questions can be hostile or threatening. In documentary investigation, the result might be refusal to answer or to go into detail on controversial matters.

- 3 Double-barreled questions ask two or more questions in combination: *Why have you asked for political asylum, and what will you do if you get it, and if not, how will that change your view of this country?* The subject will tend to answer the questions he wants to answer and ignore those that might be awkward or revealing. Being interviewed puts people under pressure. Sometimes they forget one of the questions. Experienced interviewers avoid overloading the subject with multiple questions.
- 4 Leading questions imply an intent and can involve logical entrapment: *When did you stop beating your wife?* The answer involves an implicit confession. They can be positive: *Is the fact that your brother was imprisoned by the regime the only reason you decided to work for Amnesty International?* The interviewer prefaces the question with information based on research. These questions lead the interviewee to reveal more information or motivation.
- 5 Hypothetical questions ask someone to imagine a situation or choice that has not yet occurred or may never occur and to describe how they would respond. The answer reveals the character and mentality of the subject. The interviewer describes a situation to the subject and then asks what he or she would do. Such questions often involve ethical issues: *If you knew a terrorist had information that could save hundreds of lives, would you use torture to get that information? If your brother or sister needed a kidney to survive, would you donate one of yours?*
- 6 Self-assessment questions ask people to offer judgments or evaluations of themselves and their conduct. Political candidates get asked this kind of question all the time: *Why should you be elected President of the United States?* Or it could be in retrospect: *When you chose medical research as a career, did you ever regret not becoming a professional actor?* These difficult questions hand the interviewee an opportunity that can be exploited—by a glib politician for instance. They may bring a disadvantage to someone who is shy or inarticulate.

Capturing the opinion of people on camera is a universal documentary technique. News reports often do vox pops to reflect the views of the man-in-the-street. An unrehearsed interview cannot be scripted although the questions can and should be written down ahead of time. To interview successfully, you should follow one or other of the well-established methods for constructing an interview. An interview needs to have an objective and a purpose. Why are you doing the interview, and what do you want to achieve through the interview?

Then the structure of the interview matters. Do you start with a general question that is open so that the respondent can choose the scope of the answer? Sometimes, interviewers use this approach to put the subject at ease. This is called the funnel approach. You start wide and narrow down the questioning to finish with close questioning of a focused kind. Sometimes, an aggressive interviewer will start deceptively with open questions and work the subject down to difficult, embarrassing, closed questions that go for the jugular.

Let's imagine you are doing a documentary on terrorism. You have obtained a blindfold interview with a high level, practicing terrorist. At the broad end of the funnel, you might ask, *what made you become a terrorist?* At the narrow end you can ask specific closed questions or detailed questions. *Were you involved in the planning of the 9/11 attacks?* If you were to invert the process, you would start with a specific closed question that might establish the point of departure: *Are you holding the three journalists hostage?* This could lead to broader questions that create a free ranging discussion about terrorism, world politics, and values. This is known as the inverted funnel.

Lastly, there is the tunnel approach, which avoids the narrowing or broadening strategy but combines both and simply pursues a logical, consistent line of questioning. For instance, you are interviewing a cardiologist about pacemakers for a pharmaceutical sponsored documentary about heart disease. For this you need instruction and explanation. You need to structure the interview to get the information you need. So if you ask what is the most important advance in treating heart disease, you present an expert with probably too wide a choice. There are so many types of heart disease. If you ask what is the most important development in pacemakers, you will get an informed answer. This is why you must do your research and inform yourself ahead of time.

Follow-up questions can make a difference to what you get from a subject when they unpredictably open up a topic or reveal a fact or interest which the interviewer did not think of. Improvised follow-up questions extend the responses of unanticipated answers. If you have not done your pre-interview research, you will have difficulty asking good follow up questions. Regardless of whether an interview is with a subject matter expert or a celebrity personality, preparation makes the difference. Although the answers can only be paraphrased in anticipation, the questions can be carefully written to provide a good structure from which it is easy to depart when the interview demands it.

### *Investigative Documentary*

Investigative documentary uses the medium of film or television to record an inquiry into the truth or falsehood of a certain question. Numerous controversies exist in a pluralistic society. Conflicts of interest occur between corporations and public interest, between new advances in science and technology and public conservatism, between political policies and the public good. Global warming is of enormous consequence for the human race. Yet scientific evidence has to be presented and sifted



to know the truth. Establishing that a disproportionate percentage of the prison population in America is black then demands an investigative analysis. Or revealing that prisons have become the dumping ground for the mentally ill as states cut budgets, the subject of an *American Experience* documentary, needs extraordinary entry into a restricted environment to get footage and interviews of inmates, prison administrators and psychiatrists. The class action law suit against Corning Glass by women who had silicone breast implants led to another documentary—*Breast Implants on Trial*—produced by *Frontline* at WGBH.

Investigative documentary depends on in-depth research. It is important to marshal all the facts and separate them from rumor, popular opinion, and corporate propaganda. You generally need to have a few good case histories on which to draw. This means getting the cooperation of individuals and paying experts for testimonial. Many well-prepared interviews with a good cross section of opinion are desirable.

Investigative documentaries always face a problem of balance. It is easy to create a bias by omitting, as well as by including, certain evidence. We expect impartiality. The question is, do we expect a conclusion? A trial in court must reach a verdict. Does an investigative documentary have to reach a conclusion? It seems unsatisfactory to leave things up in the air after arduously leading us through the evidence. A successful investigative documentary should point to a conclusion, should make clear an editorial view set beside the arguments and the evidence. The audience can form its own opinion, but with the knowledge that those who dug up the evidence would not make a program unless they could resolve the issues themselves.

#### *Narrative Documentary*

One of the most appealing forms of nonfiction is biography. Every life has some mystery. Famous and infamous lives invite all the emotions of curiosity, admiration, and amazement. Documenting a life in pictures through the recollections of friends and relatives, through the evidence of the public record, or through private papers can get closer to the truth. A human life has a natural narrative structure—a beginning, a middle, and an end. We all recognize it. We all empathize. Putting the facts in order, balancing the differing views, or debunking a myth is absolutely a documentary endeavor. Who doesn't wonder about the personal life of Marilyn Monroe and question the manner of her death? Who is not curious about the life of a genius like Albert Einstein? Figures of wealth and power in history forever fascinate us. The Discovery Channel and A&E program a lot of biographies, particularly of celebrities.



The story of a life may also be a window into the historical period in which the person lived. *TR: The Story of Theodore Roosevelt* puts a mythical figure in perspective. Narrative documentary can tell us the history of a town, a work of art, a war, a political movement, a revolution. The story, leaning on the Latin root of the word, becomes history.

### *Dramatized Documentary*

The dramatized documentary has become a very popular form on television. Instead of hopping between archive images, narrators, interviews, and location shots, you abandon those techniques and give yourself license to recreate or reenact a factual story with actors in costume. The purist might object to the invention of dialogue or scenes that may or may not have happened but whose exact content is not known. A case in point would be the life of Shakespeare. Perhaps the world's most famous playwright, very little is known about his life beyond official records and some comments by his contemporaries. One treatment would be to construct a narrative with a presenter showing us where documents about his life exist and linking present-day sites to historical engravings; another approach might be staged re-enactment of probable or plausible scenes.

Where is the borderline between a Hollywood biopic and a documentary? A biopic has acts and structure. A story of a life has shape, but not necessarily three acts and a denouement. So there are different dynamics. What is the difference between a movie like *Little Big Man* (1970, directed by Arthur Penn), about the defeat of General Custer at Little Big Horn, and a documentary about the same subject?<sup>3</sup> Arthur Penn is also a documentary filmmaker. It is interesting that the movie is structured around a simulated documentary interview of a 111-year-old man who witnessed the event. The movie tells a story that concentrates on the trials and misfortunes of a particular character who lives in both the white and Indian cultures. There are also documentary accounts of these events that try to establish the facts from sources. *Legends of the West* (1993) is a documentary film that goes over the same ground. The end result of a fictionalized movie is different from that of a documentary and creates a different experience for the viewer.

In practice, dramatized and narrative documentary can be, and often are, combined. Sometimes the gaps in archive material or location can be filled with an actor playing the character of the biographical subject. An actor's voice can be used to read letters and create emotional impressions that would not come across in the stricter form of exposition by voice-over, archive, and interview. This is how the life of Albert Einstein is treated in a WGBH *Nova* production. An actor plays Einstein on screen narrating parts of his life story alternating with a voice-over narrator who carries the broader story of his life and his science.

### *Expository Documentary*

The term expository documentary is meant to describe the kind of documentary that explains something. It is typical of science documentaries that explain a hypothesis or a theory and the way the experimental evidence supports it. These are often constructed as narratives that unfold in a kind of suspense story. Exposition is a nondramatic function of film and video. It shows us a place, or an artist's work, or how a life form grows, or how a product is manufactured. *The Triumph of Evil* documents the failure to prevent genocide in Rwanda. *Inside the Tobacco Deal* tells the "inside story of how two small-town Mississippi lawyers declared war on





Big Tobacco and skillfully pursued a daring new litigation strategy that ultimately brought the industry to the negotiating table.” (See DVD for web site link.)

Now compare this last documentary story with the dramatized, feature film version, *The Insider* (2000), starring Al Pacino and Russell Crowe. By doing this, you will see very clearly how drama embellishes a true story. They are both powerful narratives. The question to ask is whether the truth is revealed more accurately in factual documentary narrative or in emotionally convincing dramatic narrative portrayed by actors.

### *Propaganda*

In democratic societies, we do not like to think that we produce propaganda—politically or socially targeted messages that are dictated by a government, political party, or commercial organization—but such documentaries have been made since the beginning of the medium and will continue to be made. All governments in time of war make them. The Nazis made use of film to advance their political and racial philosophy. Leni Riefenstahl made a classic political documentary for the Third Reich, *The Triumph of the Will* (1934). It is brilliant filmmaking but for an unpalatable cause. Britain and the United States also produced plenty of biased propaganda films during World War II.

More disturbing are the social propaganda films produced in post-war America. An example of public policy propaganda is the film made in the United States to show the population how to survive a nuclear attack—pretty much a pack of lies. Then there were FBI films, such as *Reefer Madness*, that were made to show the effect of smoking marijuana and how it leads to uncontrolled sexuality and madness. Marijuana undoubtedly affects people in certain ways, but the film’s hysterical bent is grotesque social propaganda.<sup>4</sup>

We live in an economy in which advertising is rife. You could argue that advertising is a form of commercial propaganda which is, after all, hardly concerned with truth but with persuasion. It is not difficult to turn those talents to making nonfiction programs to persuade audiences about social or political issues. Political parties do it. Presidential candidates do it. Public relations firms and advertising practitioners sell their expertise to all comers, even foreign governments. The government of South Africa retained PR firms to counteract the negative publicity of apartheid. Propaganda, whether social, political, or commercial usually masquerades as documentary. That is why a strong, true documentary tradition is a priceless cultural asset that contributes to the free speech and the cultural health of a nation.

In the United States, the government, particularly the White House, tries to influence the media and the public perception of policy. Why else is the press secretary such an important appointment of any president? Foreign policy and actions abroad, especially military action, are manipulated by the Pentagon and other interests to inculcate a favorable public perception.<sup>5</sup> If you want to understand the difference between managed media coverage and the truth, a fruitful study

is the American invasion of Panama in 1989, ostensibly conducted to deal with the corrupt government of General Manuel Noriega. To understand what really went down, check out the Academy Award-winning documentary *The Panama Deception* (1992), directed by Barbara Trent and written by David Kaspar. It can be seen as an anti-propaganda documentary. It is an excellent example of an investigative documentary that goes beyond what any news special or news feature would dare to air. Nevertheless, controversy surrounds it because it makes harsh and damaging claims about the way the United States conducts its foreign policy.<sup>6</sup> It reveals a propaganda model that is strikingly similar to the one used in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003.



## Other Documentary Applications

### *Expedition Documentary*

Archeological, mountain climbing, and other types of expeditions often include a documentary film project, which is a record of the voyage and a possible source of revenue through television and video sales. Common sense tells us that it is going to be difficult to script these in advance. So writing becomes a postproduction exercise, especially voice-over commentary.

### *Travel Documentary*

Everyone has seen one. In the days when travel was more difficult and more expensive, film and video could provide a vicarious visit to an exotic country or region. Of course, this kind of documentary has a marketing or promotional function and was often sponsored rather than motivated by an investigation. Now there is a wider television audience for documentaries of exotic places. In the days when movie houses had shorts and supporting features, travel documentaries were common. Travel and exotic places are often the subject of documentaries shot in super wide screen format for IMAX theaters. A lot of people would watch a documentary about Antarctica who wouldn't spend their vacation dollars on a trip to the South Pole. These now tend to be television programs with a host appearing on camera on location and taking you on a tour.

### *Documentaries About the Making of Feature Films*

This is becoming increasingly important for DVD releases, which are interactive and offer the viewer a menu of out-takes and background on the film's story, actors, and the shooting itself. Documentaries such as these have to be shot on the basis of an outline and are largely written in postproduction. They have to include shots of the movie's final cut, intercut with interviews of the actors and production personnel. Of course, they have to be planned before the production of a film and get permission from the producers.

### *Wildlife Documentary*

This almost needs no comment. This genre is omnipresent in the television schedule. Such programs are the mainstay of Animal Planet and the PBS stations. Wildlife programs have endless appeal to a very wide audience demographic. Seeing the secret life of a rare species, being taken into the life of a pride of lions, or seeing the life of an ant colony is an experience that would not be possible without the wildlife filmmaker. Because wildlife shooting is unpredictable, the program is constructed in the editing phase when the writer becomes an important contributor in constructing the commentary.

### *Current Affairs Features*

Documentary works best when there is a topic of investigation. Too many current affairs features are weak, in my view, because they simply collect sensational material, juxtapose conflicting points of view, and end with a question or a kind of shoulder shrug leaving the viewer to weigh the evidence. Although it is all done in the name of objectivity, it is a cheap and easy out. The mystery documentaries always use this technique. After showing evidence that there might be extraterrestrial visitors and UFOs, they leave the mystery unsolved and their point of view uncommitted. The question they started out with remains unanswered at the end.

## Writing Commentaries

### *Narrative Voice-Over and Postproduction*

Probably the most noticeable writing in the documentary form is the writing of the commentary. This requires a special kind of writing that must function in conjunction with the images on screen. Therefore, all voice-over narratives or commentary are finalized in postproduction based on the running order and the running time of the sequence. The salient fact is that every word written must be spoken. Every word spoken takes time. Beginners always underestimate how long it takes to speak a commentary. The commentary cannot extend beyond the relevant images that are seen by the audience while hearing the commentary. Typically, a “scratch” commentary is written and recorded and laid against the rough cut. When the two are finalized, then the true recording with the voice over artist is recorded, often against a project picture. Alternatively, some directors will record the commentary and cut the picture to fit. The problem with this approach is that if your picture and commentary don’t match either in length or emphasis, you have to pay for the recording process all over again.

### *Wall-to-Wall Commentary*

You must let the commentary breathe, that is, give the audience a break from a droning voice. After all, film and video are visual media. Their success lies in the power of the images on screen that have intrinsic meaning without need of

commentary. Some documentaries and corporate videos have what I call wall-to-wall commentary. The voice-over starts at the beginning and continues with scarcely a break until the end. The result is monotonous and exhausting. It is made worse when there is a continuous music track running underneath it. Commentary should support the picture when it augments the visual or supplies indispensable information about the image. Even great documentaries fall down in this respect. Alain Resnais's great essay on the holocaust, *Nuit et Brouillard*, suffers from an interminable verbal assault on the ear which deprives the images of their power to evoke a self made commentary in the mind of the viewer.

#### *Commentary Counterpoint and Commentary Anchors*

One way to combat the wall-to-wall commentary effect is to set up topic sentences of commentary that are then completed by the visual sequences that follow. Skillful use of commentary sometimes results in an effect like musical counterpoint. You create a deliberate tension between the spoken commentary and the visual content. The commentary can give a clue to the deeper meaning of the images. It resembles the way music can be used both as an ironic comment on the visuals and as an emotional intensifier. The NBC miniseries *500 Nation* exhibits some examples of this. The devastation of European invasion and settlement of the Americas is explained but played out in a visual sequence that makes a statement independently of the commentary. It is advisable to use this technique as a change of pace. It sometimes works as a commentary anchor for a sequence. Commentary often has to bridge and combine disparate and diverse images in a montage. It is impossible to comment on every image; this is not the purpose of commentary. Commentary can set up a sequence that then runs better without commentary because the audience is cued and sees what it is supposed to see. The writer must search for a generic phrase or a collective idea that anchors the sequence so that it can float free visually.

#### *Dual Commentators*

Most programs have a single voice narrating the commentary. There is no reason why you cannot have more than one. Two voices could break the potential monotony of one voice in a long program. It also offers the advantage of having both a male and a female voice. Although it is really a director's or a producer's decision, the writer might write the dual narrator concept into the script. Female voices do not necessarily go with so-called female subjects. As a corporate producer, I sometimes used female voice-overs for male target audiences as a form of counterpoint to expectations so as to get attention. The female voice is attractive to the male ear and messages that might make little impression in male tones can sound intriguing. There is nearly always an element of seduction. The female voice can also be maternal and persuasive. It can be a teacher's voice and, therefore, authoritarian, or shrill, nagging, and possibly off-putting.

The psychology of voices is complex. Some voices are pleasant to listen to, and others are not. Some talents make fortunes providing voice-overs for ads and

corporate videos running all over town from studio to studio. Others cannot make a living. If you listen to voice-overs on TV spots, you can recognize certain recurring voices.

### *Commentary Clichés*

The most obvious abuse in writing commentary is the predictable and obvious linking of image and commentary such that the commentary either follows literally what is shown on the screen or telegraphs exactly what we are going to see just before we see it. This kind of literal linking reduces documentary to a kind of slide show. Unfortunately, programs continue to be made in this way. Sometimes it is better to say nothing and let the pictures tell the story. Commentary can destroy the visual life of a film.

Another chronic problem of documentary commentary is the use of predictable phrases and clichés that lazy writers use, such as “age-old,” “Nature’s fury,” “a land of hope,” and so on. You know when you hear them. You’ve heard them before in a dozen other commentaries.

Writing commentary for wildlife documentaries seems to present a great challenge that is rarely met successfully. Although this is a personal view, it is fair to say that the commentary of a large number of wildlife documentaries is obvious, predictable, or too sentimental. It has become commonplace to personify places and animals leading to flowery language and sentimentality: *The Serengeti breathes a sigh of relief as the rainy season brings life back to the parched earth.* Or we get a warthog who is called Leonard: *Leonard is playful and wants his brothers and sisters to play with him. Leonard’s Dad is an unsociable male whose only role is to fertilize the female.* It is easy to parody this kind of commentary.

### *On-Camera/Off-Camera Combinations*

The classic voice-over commentary is spoken by a talent, sometimes a well-known actor, who never appears on screen. The audience accepts this voice narrator without needing to see the person. This script has to be written very carefully for the spoken voice in short phrases that flow naturally and fit the visual sequences. The commentary has to be apposite to the picture. Above all, where no commentary is needed because the meaning of the picture is self-evident, it is a writing skill to say nothing.

A commentary script is written in postproduction against a rough cut, if not a fine cut, of the program. It has to be timed to fit the running time not only of the overall program, but of individual sequences. It is no good writing brilliant commentary that runs beyond the visual sequence. If you are still explaining the dry season on the Serengeti and there are no more dry season shots and thunderclouds and rain is sheeting down on the screen, you are forced to curtail your dry season remarks. It is easier to rewrite the commentary than to recut the film. Moreover, you cannot rewrite in the recording session when you are paying big bucks for the studio, the engineer, and the voice talent. So you need a breakdown of the film with

timed sections in order to write. You have to test out what you write by reading it aloud against the picture.

There are two ways of fitting commentary to film or video. You record a roughly timed commentary and then lay it over the picture as a separate audio track. Where it doesn't fit exactly, you edit out pauses in the audio track or edit images so that you get the picture and voice-over to line up for the emphasis and effect that you want. Once it is set, you lay the music and then mix the tracks so that the levels fade up and down or in and out to achieve the final result.

The second technique is to record the commentary to play back. You loop sections of the final cut and cue the voice artist to deliver the commentary while watching the sequence. This sometimes has the advantage of getting a more nuanced and effective delivery compared to reading a text in a recording booth without the benefit of picture. Voicing lines to picture is indispensable to postproduction of dialogue films or dubbing a foreign language, but for ordinary documentary it is usually more expensive.

Narration can also be delivered to camera by a talent that appears on screen. Sometimes, this can be a celebrity or a well-known actor who lends interest to the topic. Obviously, if the narrator stays on screen all the time, you end up with a continuous talking head. This type of commentary always involves running the voice track of the narrator while cutting away to shots of something else, usually what the commentary is talking about. In that way, you can alternate between an on-screen narrator who looks into the lens and engages the audience emotionally and a voice-over whose identity you know while liberating the screen for images that support the story. This technique requires writing prior to production and commits the director to shooting the narrator in certain locations and backgrounds. It is usually reserved for programs that advocate a point of view rather than try to be objective.

One of the earliest of these documentary series was *Civilization*, produced by the BBC in the 1960s with Kenneth (Lord) Clarke, the distinguished art historian, as on-screen narrator. Alistair Cooke, the well-known columnist and radio commentator, narrated a documentary series titled *America* (1972) in a similar way. More recently, Kevin Costner made and narrated a documentary series, *500 Nations* (1995), about the North American native peoples, their rich civilization, and its destruction by European invasion.

The reasons for using this technique are numerous. It works when you have an on-screen authority or personality whose presence enhances the audience experience. Sometimes, it can get in the way of showing the audience the pictures you want them to see instead of this intrusive character. It works in conjunction with interviewing techniques. Your narrator can interview experts, characters, or passersby and seamlessly integrate interviews, on-screen narration, and voice-over. This versatility is attractive to makers of factual programming. This choice has to be made before production and commits both writer and director to that decision.

## Conclusion

Documentary and nonfiction narrative have an honorable place in the history of the medium and will continue to do so. Now most Internet content falls into the category of nonfiction narrative of some kind. Immense numbers of websites are now dedicated to documenting and documentary objectives. Informing a public, as well as entertaining a public, remains a significant goal of all media formats. Documentary investigation is essential to news analysis although it is largely excluded from regular news because of the air time required for in-depth exploration of a topic. The cable channels continue to buy and commission documentary work. Stories about people, historical figures, and historical events make for compelling nonfiction narratives.

Although documentary is probably a writer/director's medium more than a writer's medium, the background research and the writing of a treatment are a crucial contribution to the form. In postproduction, writing good voice-over can make or break a documentary. Whether the director/writer or an independent writer composes this text, it remains a key writing job in factual narrative film and corporate video.

## Exercises

1. Record a documentary from television. Then, with the sound turned all the way down on playback, write your own commentary or voice-over narrative for the visual content.
2. Find an example of a good documentary. Play the audio track without looking at the screen, or dub off the audio track. Time the phrases and time the pauses.
3. Write an outline or treatment for a biographical documentary on a celebrity or historical figure. Make a list of research needs for pictures, locations, and interviews.
4. Write a set of interview questions for the subject of a biography of someone you know or of someone whose life you would like to document.
5. Write an outline for a documentary on events at the Little Big Horn. Make a shot list of key images.
6. View *Manufacturing Consent—Noam Chomsky and the Media* (1994); *The Panama Deception* (1992); the WGBH–Boston documentary *War and Peace in Panama* (1991); and *Missing* (1982) a feature film written by Donald Stewart II and directed by Costa-Gavras about American involvement in a Chilean right-wing coup d'état. Make a list of those features that make a film a documentary and those qualities that make it dramatized entertainment with a message.



7. Compare an investigative documentary, *Smoke in the Eyes*, produced by *Frontline* with the feature film, *The Insider* (1999), in which Al Pacino portrays Lowell Bergman, the CBS 60 Minutes newsman, who later became a Frontline producer when he resigned over the CBS refusal to air the story about Dr. Jeffrey Wigand blowing the whistle on Big Tobacco. It was suppressed by the CBS parent company, Westinghouse.

## Endnotes

Note: All web sites are listed as active links in the accompanying DVD.

<sup>1</sup>Leland Stanford, who was his patron, published a book in 1882, *The Horse in Motion*. The two quarreled over the credits, and Muybridge went on to publish further works: *Animal Locomotion* (1887) and *Animals in Motion* (1899). See the video at <http://photo.ucr.edu/photographers/muybridge/contents.html>.

<sup>2</sup>See Barry Hampe, *Making Documentaries and Reality Videos*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1997, p. 87.

<sup>3</sup>Some documentary background can be found on the web at <http://www.garryowen.com/>; <http://www.curtis-collection.com/tribe%20data/custer.html>; and <http://www.mwac.nps.gov/libi/>.

<sup>4</sup>See the *Frontline* documentary entitled *Busted: America's War on Marijuana* (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/dope/>).

<sup>5</sup>A powerful study of this evidence can be found in the video *Manufacturing Consent—Noam Chomsky and the Media* (1994; <http://uk.imdb.com/Title?0104810>).

<sup>6</sup>A bonus of the World Wide Web is the opportunity to read reviews on [amazon.com](http://amazon.com), where the video is for sale, by individuals who served in the military in Panama during the Bush intervention, Operation Just Cause (<http://uk.imdb.com/Title?0105089>).



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# Entertaining with Visual Media

## PART THREE

In *Get Shorty* (1995), John Travolta plays Chili Palmer, an enforcer for loan sharks who want to collect from a movie producer. As he gets caught up in the movie world, he comes out with the perfect line with which to launch this part of the book: “I’ve got a great idea for a movie.” Let’s face it. Everybody has an idea for a movie. We’ve all seen more films and television movies than we can count. We can all imagine a story, a character, or an imaginary world that would be just as good as some of the movies we have seen. Now is the time to look more closely at what it means to conceive and write a feature film or a long-form television script. Many dream of a concept, but not many have the perseverance to write a two-hour screenplay. Even if you can complete a screenplay, the fact is that many are written, but few are chosen. Hollywood is reputed to spend \$500 million on development of stories and screenplays and buy at least 10 times more scripts than are ever produced. Most professionals would agree that there is always room for good writing and original ideas. The lure is the lucrative fees that are paid for good scripts and even for some not-so-good scripts.

The market changes constantly. Unknown writers and directors sometimes strike a chord that resonates with the public imagination and see their creation soar into the spotlight. Some low-budget movies such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) have grossed millions. In 1969, Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda made a low-budget movie, *Easy Rider*, that spoke to a generation and threw Hollywood into confusion

in an era when it was making big budget musicals and spectacles that lost money. The studios at that time did not understand the youth market that made up a large portion of moviegoers. Studios usually try to back known quantities and spend the bulk of their development money on projects written by writers with demonstrable talent.

Let's backtrack a little and look at how it all started. The companies that were making films for the arcades and nickelodeons competed fiercely. There was no talk of art. The objective was to sell the novelty of the moving picture sensation and visual amusement for profit. This meant finding ways to appeal to the general public. Within a very short time after the invention of the moving picture medium, early film makers experimented with short fictional narratives. With the first attempt to tell a story on film, a need for script writing arose. To set a camera in front of an onrushing train doesn't require a script, but to tell the stories of the *Perils of Pauline* (1914) in which we see her tied to the track by a villain and wonder what will happen in next week's episode requires storytelling. It requires a sequence of shots to be set up. Although a director might keep a simple story in his head, the economy of the medium dictates that production be planned and produced for a known cost. In order to plan and budget, there has to be a written script.

Of all the forms of film and television, the most captivating is the feature film. The power of the medium to hold audiences the world over has endured for a century. The public has embraced this experience of escapism, laughter, tears, fantasy, and drama. Talented writers and directors, in spite of the studio film factories, have made out of the medium a seventh art.<sup>1</sup> Visual storytelling was firmly embedded in the popular culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and promises to be a significant part of 21<sup>st</sup> Century media. Therefore, the writer who conceives the story or adapts the story and writes the dialogue must continue to be indispensable to program creation.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup>Andre Bazin, in *Le Septième Art* (New York: Penguin Books). The other 6 arts are music, drama, painting, sculpture, literature, and dance.

## Dramatic Structure and Form

# 9

### Origins of Drama

The origin of drama in Western culture is rooted in the Greek theatre. The playwrights of ancient Athens created dramatic structure. Its philosophers and rhetoricians, principally Aristotle in the *Poetics*, defined the theories of tragedy and comedy, concepts that hold true to the present day. Its architects created amphitheatres. The Romans continued the theatrical tradition by writing and performing plays. The remains of their amphitheatres as well as their viaducts survive to this day in places far from Rome in what were then their colonial outposts in Europe.

Although performance, singing, juggling, reciting poetry, and storytelling never ceased over the centuries, there is little evidence of theatrical culture after the Romans until Medieval morality plays and the miracle of Elizabethan theatre in 16<sup>th</sup> Century England. In this extraordinary ferment of poetry, of rediscovery of the classical literature of Greece and Rome, and of reinvention of the theatrical stage, the genius of Shakespeare flowered and endowed us with thirty-seven plays consisting of comedies, histories, and tragedies. Ever since, English-speaking culture has continued to produce playwrights, plays, and players.

If you were alive at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and somehow got involved with the new medium of movies and wanted to create dramatic films, you would have naturally drawn on the theatrical tradition that you knew. Plays and photo-plays, as they were initially called, had certain things in common that made them work. To have drama you have to have conflict.

### Conflict

Conflict is the basis for all dramatic plots. Conflict creates tension. Tension demands change and resolution of that tension through action, thought, and dialogue. This is the energy that drives a plot forward. You can identify the conflict engine in any film or television drama. The conflict can be between characters, between

a character and his or her own nature, or between a character and natural forces. Conflict produces a situation that is unstable. In the first few scenes of *Hamlet*, we know that his uncle murdered Prince Hamlet's father, his right to the throne of Denmark was usurped, and his mother has married this same villainous uncle. He is in love with the daughter of a high-ranking courtier who is currying favor with the new king and sees this relationship as a way to advance his career. Hamlet is alone, and his life in danger in a treacherous political situation. What is he going to do? Watching this tragedy unfold until all of its complications are resolved in a magnificent duel scene grips audiences in every new generation and will do so until the end of time.

Aristotle summed it up pretty well twenty-four hundred years ago. He explained tragedy as an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude. This action evokes the emotions of pity and fear in the audience, which are then purged through their witnessing the spectacle. Pity is aroused when we see someone suffer the consequences of mistakes or human frailty, and fear by the recognition that the tragic character is like ourselves. We identify with the tragic hero—*there but for the grace of God go I*. Aristotle also defined a key characteristic of good drama, namely, that “the unraveling of the plot . . . must arise out of the plot itself. . . not be brought about by the *deus ex machina* as in *The Medea*, or in the return of the Greeks in *The Iliad*.” A lot of Hollywood producers ought to be made to memorize Aristotle. Of course, maybe they have, and, in the absence of box office figures from Athens, don't consider those ancient Greeks to be A-list writers.

So we see deliberate violations of this principle that ruin the play or the movie by having some external force, like the gods in Greek mythology, looking down and interfering in the destiny of men and resolving the tension of the plot. *Deus ex machina* means, literally, “a god outside of the machine,” that is, a force or event outside the premise of the plot invented by the writer that fixes the problem of the plot. Somebody wins the lottery. The cavalry rides over the hill and rescues the hero. Such contrived intervention short circuits the completion of the purge of the emotions of pity and fear that are engendered in the conflict. Tragedies don't, or shouldn't, have sequels.

What about comedy? Comedy has the same premise—a conflict of interests, a conflict of expectation and reality, a predicament that cannot stay the same. It must be resolved. The need to resolve it drives the characters and the plot forward to increasingly hilarious dilemmas until the problem is resolved and we can all go home contented. Aristotle said that comedy aims at representing men as worse, tragedy as better, than in actual life. Try this! A brother and a sister are shipwrecked in a foreign country. The girl disguises herself as a man and seeks favor at the court of the local Count. This Count is courting a beautiful lady and uses the cross-dressing girl as a go-between. The lady falls in love with the messenger who (herself) is in love with the Count on whose behalf she must woo. Her good fortune depends on pretending to be a man. If her true gender is discovered, the game is up. The harder she works at being the messenger of love

to the lady, the worse the situation becomes. What a delicious spectacle for the audience! For the Elizabethan audience, there was the added irony that female parts were played by young male actors.<sup>1</sup> Between this situation and its resolution, there's going to be lots of hilarious confusion. And we haven't even brought in the subplots.

Do you recognize Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*? Shakespeare is the master. The Elizabethan English of 400 years ago should not obscure the sheer theatricality of his plays and the plain fact that his theater was commercial entertainment for a paying audience of all classes.<sup>2</sup> The parallel to the birth of the movies as a new form of commercial entertainment is interesting. Some of the problems are the same. There is a great literary tradition, technical innovation, and a bottom line. The difference is that the cinema was, from the outset, an industrial enterprise based on mass production rather than individual artistic talent. Nevertheless, artistic talent was necessary both in front of, and behind, the camera.

Lots of people—studio heads, producers, and agents—have ideas for movies or buy rights to novels, plays, and musicals to turn into movies. Rarely can they write the scripts. Even if they have the talent, they don't have the time because they are making more money running the business. Therefore, movies and television series cannot be made without scriptwriters. The people in control of the process of production cannot function without writers. From the beginning, they have sought to control this creative person whose work is difficult to measure. The friction between creative artists and industrial moviemakers continues to this day. Hollywood is a town dedicated to deals and to making money. It is no wonder that writers are organized into a trade union, the Writers Guild of America (East and West).<sup>3</sup>

To some extent, the screenplay is a form created by Hollywood. It is true that plays have, since the theater of ancient Athens, found structures which, when analyzed, help us to create our own plays. If the premise of Hollywood film production is to mass produce entertainment or, more recently, to find the formula for product that will quickly produce cash flow avalanches from box office hits, then it becomes important to be able to pick the right scripts. It is probably more important to be able to define the script (or script elements) that will form the basis for box office success. Industrializing the script is a consequence of industrializing movie production and distribution. It became the practice to employ more than one writer on script development in order to keep creative control. The practice continues to this day.



## Three Act Structures for Film and Television

When we go to the theater, we experience scene changes, a division of the play into acts, and an intermission. When we watch television, we get commercial breaks that usually happen at a significant point. So television appears to have acts. When we go to the movies, however, we have a seamless narrative experience from beginning

to end. In reality, most movies have an intrinsic three-act structure. The popular audience does not think about acts or structures. Nevertheless, this structure is what makes the form work even if the audience is not conscious of it. There is a parallel to music. Music has structures that the composer uses: counterpoint, refrain, repetitions, key changes that follow conventions, and even rules based on the harmonies of a scale. People may not be aware of the rules of composition, but they unknowingly respond to them. Music without structural form is noise, and movies and television without a dramatic structure leave audiences confused or dissatisfied, even if they can't explain why.

Many stories, legends, myths, and folktales exhibit a natural form of storytelling from an oral tradition. It seems to correspond to how the human psyche responds emotionally to stories and to the way human psychology works. Perhaps it is akin to forms in nature like the golden ratio in the shell of the nautilus, or like the mathematical ratios of musical notes. This cultural story fabric shows patterns that are probably universal or archetypal. If you can find that pattern and embed it in your film story, you will probably find a wide audience. That is what Hollywood writers and directors have learned.

What are the characteristics of good stories? They have a main character or hero. That hero has a problem that is life altering or life threatening. The hero has an adversary, either animal such as a monster or dragon, or human such as a rival, a wicked uncle (as in *Hamlet*), or a stepmother, which leads to significant conflict. The story unfolds with a rising action that includes heart-stopping reversals and turning points. The Hollywood storytellers have identified it as a structure having three acts. Many movies exploit and enhance a natural three-act storyline and archetypal heroes that are recognizable in myth and legend.<sup>4</sup>

The folktale *Little Red Riding Hood* has a basic structure that is easy to follow and has worked for generations of children. What is important is that it works even if you know the story. Stories that work, work forever. Children know the story but still respond with the same emotion each time they hear it or read it. In fact, the repetition of the story enhances its value. When you read to your children, you discover the unschooled responses of humankind to narrative. Homer's *Odyssey* or *Iliad* does not wear out. Shakespeare's great tragedies are revisited in every generation, whether it is *Hamlet* (1990) played by Mel Gibson, a modernized *Romeo and Juliet* (1996), with Leonardo DiCaprio playing Romeo, or *The Merchant of Venice* (2004), with Al Pacino playing Shylock. Filmmakers can't stay away from them. Let us now examine the structure of the story through the unschooled responses of children to discover what makes it work.

Little Red Riding Hood is given a task by her mother. She has to take a basket of food to her Grandma, who is not well. To get there, she has to walk through the forest. It is a journey. So the young girl is the protagonist, the lead character. The audience identifies with her. She has a problem. She has to find the way to her Grandma's house. This is a test of character and resolve and an adventure that is seemingly innocent.

The sun is shining. The sky is blue. The birds are singing. What could happen? Many movies start in the same way. Then Little Red Riding Hood loses her way. Soon, the audience learns that there is a Wolf in the forest, who spies the little girl and intends to eat her. This character is the antagonist, or the villain. Now we know something she doesn't know. This creates suspense. It also creates sympathy and pity for her and concern about her destiny. She is alone and lost in the woods with a hungry, cunning Wolf slinking around who wants to eat her alive. What will happen to her? Being lost in urban society is an inconvenience; being lost in nature—a desert, a forest, a jungle, at sea—is a life-threatening trial. We have forgotten what children know. The fear of being lost is primordial.

This is Act I. Act I has to establish several fundamentals for the audience:

- Introduce the main character.
- Introduce supporting characters.
- Establish a task, an intention, a desired outcome.
- Establish an obstacle, a problem, an adversary.
- Create conflict, suspense, tension.
- End with a reversal or a setback.

If the story stopped now, the audience would be very frustrated. By the end of Act I, we want to know what is going to happen. When the audience reaches this state—understanding the problem, knowing the main character, and wanting to know the outcome—Act I is complete. This does not mean you have to mark this point. On television, this is where you would place a station break because you give the audience a reason to stick around to see what is going to happen. Act I is simply the completion of a response pattern.

Now Little Red Riding Hood is lost in the forest and a little worried. Although the sun is still shining and the birds are still singing, the hours of the day are numbered. In our movie version, we could have dark clouds blot out the sun or a storm build up on the horizon. This would signal the audience that danger threatens (in literary rhetoric, when nature seems to mirror human emotions, it is called a pathetic fallacy). We hear the sound of an axe chopping wood. We come upon a Woodcutter. Little Red Riding Hood is so glad to see him because she can ask him the way. This is the seeding of a sub-plot, not fully developed, but indicative of movie structures. The Woodcutter gives her directions and sends her on the way. There is temporary emotional relief. Little Red Riding Hood is going to make it. Then cut to the Wolf who has overheard the conversation and now knows where she is going. So he runs ahead and gets to Grandma's cottage first.

This is the R-rated version, by the way. If you are under 17, you need your mother's written permission to continue reading.

We now have a terrifying scene in which a helpless Grandma gets eaten alive by the snarling Wolf. The horror of this is amplified in intensity because it now sets up a fearful apprehension about what will happen to our heroine. Turn the

screw a little tighter. The Wolf now dresses in Grandma's clothes and with an evil chuckle goes to her bedroom and gets into bed. We show the wolf imitating Grandma's voice (the Wolf is played by Jack Nicholson). Now the audience is really worried. Whatever problems Little Red Riding Hood had in Act I are now intensified and complicated. Sometimes, the main character knows and sees the problem. Sometimes, only the audience knows. After rushing along through the forest, she suddenly comes into a beautiful clearing and sees Grandma's cottage. She rushes up to the front door and knocks. This is the end of Act II.

Now the audience is really invested in the fate of Little Red Riding Hood. What is going to happen? If the story stopped now, the audience would go out of its mind. The situation has become worse. The predicament of the main character is as serious as it can get. It has to be resolved. There has to be a conclusion, a resolution, or a denouement as it is called. That's when you know Act II has finished, and it is time for Act III to begin. Once again, it is not announced. It is a point in the emotional response of the audience to the story.

Act II must:

- Complicate the predicament of the main character, raise the stakes.
- Introduce a subplot.
- Introduce subordinate characters.
- Create an overwhelming need for final resolution.
- End with a new level of crisis.

Now the Wolf (playing Grandma) calls her to come in, or maybe the door is left open by the earlier arrival of the Wolf. Little Red Riding Hood wonders where her Grandma is. We could write in shots that show evidence of a struggle and a fleeting reaction of puzzlement on her face mixed with joyful anticipation of seeing her Grandma. "I'm in the bedroom," calls the Wolf in his granny voice. We cut to the surprise on Little Red Riding Hood's face as she sees the false Granny. The Wolf encourages her to come nearer. She goes through the classic dialogue: "Oh Grand Mama . . . what big ears you have!"

"All the better to hear you with, my dear," replies the Wolf. The sequence ends with the terrifying revelation of the true identity of the Wolf. Little Red Riding Hood screams in total, absolute terror. This is the ultimate horror story. The audience is in agony at the prospect of her downfall. The jaws open wide. She screams as the Wolf devours her. She is gone. This is the ultimate setback.

At this point, the audience is in a state of shock. Could this be the end? Surely not! While the Wolf rips off the Grandma's clothes, we cut to the Woodcutter with his axe coming into the clearing. Just as he is about to go up to the door, he stops as he catches sight of a Wolf through the window. He sneaks up and notices the signs of struggle and the blood of the victims and then sees the Wolf triumphant. Audience morale rebuilds. There is hope again. The Woodcutter catches the Wolf off guard and with a roar splits his skull with his axe. Audience emotion soars with elation.

The Wolf dies in agony. The audience rejoices in the violent and painful end of the Wolf. This is the fundamental emotional mechanism through which movies introduce violence and slake the audience's thirst for revenge. Revenge is satisfied, but we've lost Grandma and Little Red Riding Hood.

In many children's books, this doesn't happen. This is the R-rated version, the European version.

Wait! We hear the strange sound of cries from inside the Wolf. The Woodcutter takes his knife and slits the Wolf open and pulls out Little Red Riding Hood and Grandma. They are slimy, bloody, and exhausted but whole. Sobbing, she falls into his arms. It could end here, or we could see them cleaned up and recovered saying goodbye to the Woodcutter as he goes off into the woods. Of course, one variation of the Woodcutter plot is that he saves the heroine, and they get married and live happily ever after. You recognize that scene in a million movies.

Act III must:

- Intensify the problem.
- Close the subplot by resolving it into the main plot.
- Create an ultimate reversal or a setback in the predicament of the main character.
- Bring about a denouement or resolution of the setback and the whole story.
- Create the triumph of the hero, protagonist or main character and the downfall of the antagonist or villain.

Little Red Riding Hood is the archetype of the majority of horror films in which there is always a female victim and always some menacing man/beast/alien/mutant/creature who threatens her. This ending could be happy or tragic, funny or serious. Every turn of the story can be nuanced by writing, by directing, or by casting to express horror, drama, or comedy.

To summarize, Act I usually must accomplish three main tasks: introduce the main characters; establish a problem or conflict that will drive the movie forward; and establish the setting. How do you know when Act I has ended? It usually ends with a major crisis for the main character or protagonist (we are still using the language of Greek theater) and a temporary triumph for the antagonist.

Act II brings complications and a subplot. It usually ends with a reversal in which the main character is in even greater difficulty.

Act III must bring a resolution of the original conflict, sometimes through the agency of a character from the subplot.

The three-act movie has evolved into a Hollywood convention. It accommodates a variety of movie genres. Although there are a thousand variations on the basic plot, broadly speaking, most film stories fit themselves around a skeletal structure. This structure is not just the plot, it is more a map of the emotional response pattern of the audience. It is the difference between life and art, fact and fiction, reality and fantasy. You can't watch life, your own or anyone else's, like a movie. Life is what

we are living and experiencing every day. It has no beginning and no ending for us because we are always in the middle, in the present. In some sense, life has no apparent plot, no dramatic structure. In fact, we are constantly trying to give it shape and structure by ceremonies, by time divisions, or by self-invented narration. In a movie, we have to give the experience a beginning, a middle, and an end. That is why the three-act structure works. It also works for television. Television episodes sometimes have four acts so that commercial breaks can be inserted with the least disruption. Indeed, the breaks are used cleverly to heighten the audience's anticipation by leaving them at key unresolved moments in the natural rhythm of the drama.

Why three acts? Shakespeare had five. Modern stage plays seem to have two separated by an intermission. Movies don't have breaks in them at all. They run for approximately two hours without a break. So why three acts? The reason is it works. Nobody has legislated that screenplays have to have three acts. It is just the case that most of them do. They are not marked down as acts in the screenplay and most certainly not indicated in the screen image that the audience sees. It is a virtual structure that seems to accommodate the way stories can be told in moving pictures. However, not all movies use the three-act structure. There are alternative story structures.

Some stories are developed around characters. Eric Rohmer, a French director, has made a series of films over thirty years that examine dilemmas of human character that do not depend on the three-act structure. Of course, big Hollywood (revolving around movie stars and box office megabucks) holds this kind of film in contempt as low budget, no-account art film. Woody Allen is another unconventional storyteller in film whose films often evolve around characters and situations. So at the risk of confusion, we should learn the classic three-act form while at the same time keeping in mind that there may be other narrative techniques for film and television.<sup>5</sup>

## Other Narrative Structures

Other narrative forms have an ancient pedigree that probably conforms to another human emotional template. Since ancient times, minstrels have sung and recited epic poems and mythical stories for communal audiences. These stories have exerted a powerful influence on poets and storytellers for centuries: the story of the war of Troy, told by the Greek poet Homer in *The Iliad* and continued by the Roman poet Virgil in *The Aeneid*. The structure of epics is episodic, multilayered, and populated by numerous heroes and figures, often including divinities. The wanderings of Odysseus returning from the war of Troy told by Homer in *The Odyssey* is, in a sense, a subplot of *The Iliad*. In the epic, there are often stories within stories.

This form of storytelling reappears in Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, in which characters in the story tell one another (and the reader) stories while they are part of a larger story. Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is an episodic and peripatetic (meaning "wandering") story. The same narrative structure is replicated in the television series and soap operas, like *The Bold and the Beautiful* or *The Young and the Restless*—narratives which are a kind of modern minstrel tale for the community, telling multi-character, multi-plot tales of greed, love, revenge, and justice. Soap operas, crass as many of them are, thrive on parallel story lines that do not follow a three-act structure. Now that many television series like *The West Wing* and *The Sopranos* are available on DVD, audiences can see them as television novels or epics with complex storylines.

Another device with origins in the complex weaving of epic narratives is the play-within-a-play device. Shakespeare uses it more than once. In *Hamlet*, it reveals the truth that underlies all of the deceptions of the various characters. It is no accident that the players that Hamlet asks to perform his play ("wherein to catch the conscience of the King") are asked by him to recite a speech about the murder of Priam, the king of Troy, from a play based on *The Aeneid* (which connects the story of Troy to the origin of Rome through a survivor of the sacking of Troy). Those lines, often cut from modern productions, set in epic context the meaning of the murder of the king, Hamlet's father, for the Elizabethan audience. The play within a play technique, beloved by Shakespeare, has a parallel in the film within a film technique. The appeal of the movie within the movie device has been exploited by Francois Truffault in *La Nuit Americaine* (1973) and by Robert Altman in *The Player* (1992), which has a kind of allusion to Hamlet in its plot. We've mentioned *Get Shorty* (1995), which is a film about how the film we are watching gets to be made. There is an offensive movie called *8mm* (1999) about an illicit market in snuff films, which is essentially a film within a film. *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) is a film about making a documentary about a supernatural phenomenon, which effectively disguises the low budget production techniques of hand held 16mm in the device and recruits the audience as a partner in the plot of investigation. It is an eternally appealing way to conceal and reveal meaning at the same time.

The peripatetic form of the novel is a distant cousin of *The Odyssey*. Henry Fielding's 18<sup>th</sup> Century novel *Tom Jones* was turned into a hugely successful movie.<sup>6</sup> Even a mainstream film like *Forrest Gump* (1994) has a story structure that is peripatetic and almost helical and spiral in its structure. The road movie is a modern American equivalent in which the hero, or often a pair of lovers (*Bonnie and Clyde*, 1967) or a pair of friends, cross the country or trace out a career. The buddy movie was probably established with *Easy Rider* (1969). It is about two hippie bikers who travel through American culture and landscape, trying to get to the Mardi Gras in New Orleans, *The Defiant Ones* (1958) is about two convicts—one white, one black—bound together, escaping from a chain gang. One of the most successful of this genre is *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969).



## The Flashback

*Citizen Kane* (1941), the masterpiece of Orson Welles, is considered to be one of the greatest films of all time for its storytelling power, its cinematography, and its direction, and it is also probably the greatest example of the flashback structure. It begins with the death of Kane, a ruthless and egomaniacal newspaper baron whom everyone understood to be a portrait of the real life William Randolph Hearst. The story unfolds as a newspaper reporter interviews a number of key characters who knew Kane and who recount their differing recollections. We flash back to the dramatized scenes of Kane's life in long sequences and flash forward to scenes of the reporter, who is a kind of narrator, interviewing Kane's drunk ex-wife or his senile former colleague and employee of many years. The script by Herman J. Mankiewicz and Orson Welles is brilliant movie writing.

## Genres

Genre is a French word that means “type” or “class” of things. Another way to look at movie structure is to see repetitive characteristics in movies that have similar stories and plots. These recognizable conventions of plot and setting are useful shorthand descriptions that most of us use to describe something we saw. We say that it was a western, a horror film, a suspense thriller, or a romantic comedy in order to convey a certain type of entertainment experience—one that we have had before and recognize. We cannot describe all of the patterns, and anyway, genres can be mixed. We would risk sounding like Polonius describing to Hamlet the acting range of the players coming to Elsinore: “pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral (tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral).”<sup>7</sup>

### *Westerns*

This genre began with published stories of the outlaws and other colorful characters of the frontier and the American West. It is the American version of the pirate and outlaw tale of European fiction. In many ways the Western recapitulates the story of Robin Hood. Robin Hood could be the archetypal story of the good guy wronged, who has to live beyond the law while the bad guy, the Sheriff of Nottingham, is the law. Maid Marian is the love interest. The good king Richard Coeur-de-Lion is away at the crusades while his bad brother John usurps the throne. Robin, a dispossessed nobleman, robs from the rich and gives to the poor. You could be forgiven for thinking that this piece of English history was invented by a Hollywood scriptwriter. No wonder this story has been made into a film a dozen times, most recently by Kevin Costner in 1991.<sup>8</sup> Its story line serves the western.

No sooner had motion picture been invented than the theme of the western furnished rich material, starting with *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) and retelling the story of characters such as Jesse James, Billy the Kid, and Wyatt Earp.

Wyatt Earp, his two brothers, and Doc Holiday confront the Clinton gang in the famous gunfight at the OK Corral, which has been made into film several times.<sup>9</sup> The classic *My Darling Clementine* (1946), directed by John Ford, stands out among them. But the best Doc Holiday is played by Val Kilmer in *Tombstone* (1993). Some of my favorites are *Winchester 73* (1950), *The Gunfighter* (1950), and *High Noon* (1953). The Clint Eastwood series of Westerns beginning with the spaghetti westerns of Sergio Leone is a newer reworking of the genre, but without the realism. A television masterpiece in this genre is the miniseries *Lonesome Dove* (1989), adapted from Larry McMurtry's western novel.

### *Romantic Comedies*

Romantic comedy often deals with social issues about love, money, class, and society. The essential element is an attraction usually between a man and a woman who either start out by detesting one another or by loving one another and then have to overcome amusing obstacles.

A classic romantic comedy, which required strong male and female leads, is *The Philadelphia Story* (1940). The hostile banter between the male and female leads is in inverse proportion to the warmth of the union with which it will finish. *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) is a very popular romantic comedy that errs on the sentimental side. *Liar, Liar* (1997) has a great comic premise. What if a little boy's wish as he blows out his birthday candles, that his divorced father would stop lying, were to come true? It leads to endless complications and hilarious scenes in which Jim Carrey says exactly what he thinks to everyone he meets. His son's wish eventually brings the father and mother back together in a second chance at repairing the American marriage.

Another brilliant comic premise lies behind *The Bachelor* (1999). A man is going to inherit \$100 million on the condition that he is married by his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. Guess what! Tomorrow is his 30th birthday and his girlfriend has just turned him down on a botched proposal. In desperation, he now frantically starts calling all his recent ex-girlfriends with a proposal. They all turn him down. Each refusal heightens the tension and incites the audience's interest to a fever pitch. We won't reveal how it ends, but you can recognize a brilliant comic premise in this plot.

### *Horror Movies*

This genre has origins in folk literature and fairy tales that children learn. It has a literary pedigree in the classic gothic novel *Frankenstein* (1818), by Mary Shelley. Then there is the vampire legend, which was fixed in its literary form by John Polidori in *The Vampyre* while holed up in a Swiss castle with Lord Byron and Percy and Mary Shelley in 1816, and in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). In the American tradition, we have the macabre tales of Edgar Allan Poe. It is now very much a movie genre that has its own traditions that are almost stronger than any literary tradition. Many of its effects used to depend on lighting, but nowadays depend on computer-generated special effects. Whether it is psychological horror

like Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) or supernatural horror films such as *Dracula* (many versions) or *The Exorcist* (1973), there is always a strong element of suspense and shock created by playing on the audience's fear of the supernatural and violent threats to normal existence.

#### *Road Movies*

The road movie involves a journey that is both literal and figurative at the same time. It could be a journey of search or a journey of escape. These have ancient pedigree. The original road movie archetype is probably Homer's *Odyssey* or *Jason and the Argonauts*, which was remade in May 2000 as a television miniseries. In these cases, the three-act structure is not always necessary. The structure becomes episodic. A seminal road movie is *Easy Rider* (1969), which is a journey across American culture and counter-culture of the late 1960s accompanied by a chorus of rock-and-roll anthems.

#### *Science Fiction*

H. G. Wells wrote a science fiction novel called *War of the Worlds*, which was produced as a radio play in a documentary fashion by Orson Welles so convincingly that people began to flee New York and New Jersey believing that a Martian invasion was actually taking place. Then it was made into a movie in 1953, and it still stands up well for its special effects. Steven Spielberg remade the movie in 2005. The genre of science fiction was relegated to B movies until Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1970) broke out into the big time box office. *Star Wars* has since firmly claimed top box office status for science fiction together with classics such as Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *E.T.* (1982).

There are many subgenre variations, but the basic plot is recognizable. Aliens invade the earth either as a single threat, as in *The Thing* (1956), or as a race, as in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). We usually cannot tell who is human and who is alien. By the time we get to *Men in Black* (1997) we have combined it with the buddy movie and comedy. A film like *Alien* (1979) combines science fiction, horror, and suspense. Almost a generation later this subgenre is still going strong in a movie like *Species* (1995).

#### *War Movies*

This genre hardly needs definition. These movies describe on a huge canvas the sweep and confusion of war and the way it impacts the lives of individuals and civilian populations. Most war movies are ambivalent about war. The conflict between realism and myth animates the genre. They can be divided between those that celebrate heroism, nationalism and victory, and those that show suffering and futility. *D-Day: The Sixth of June* (1956), *The Guns of Navarone* (1961), *The Longest Day* (1962), *Tora, Tora, Tora* (1970), and *Midway* (1976) try for the historical sweep. The first World War movie classic, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), is an anti-war movie as much as a war movie. *The Deer Hunter* (1978), stemming out of the

Vietnam war, is a modern anti-war movie, as is *Apocalypse Now* (1979). *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970), later turned into a television series, is an ironic view of the Korean war from a behind-the-lines medical unit. *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) tries to have it both ways by combining extreme realism with a sentimental, patriotic storyline.

#### *Buddy Movies*

The beginning of the buddy movie was *The Defiant Ones* (1958), in which Tony Curtis and Sidney Poitier escape from a chain gang while still shackled together. The buddy theme is very much a part of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) although it is also a western. The relationship between the two lead characters is in one way what the movie is about. This now has a female variant in films like *Thelma and Louise* (1991).

#### *Murder Mysteries*

*Body Heat* (1981), written as an original screenplay and directed by Lawrence Kasdan, is a small masterpiece with a cunning plot and excellent performances. In the literary tradition, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* and Agatha Christie's *Hercule Poirot* laid the foundations of the genre, which also blends into the detective story or private eye movie. Typically, the plot is very involved and the audience cannot guess who the culprit is until all is revealed at the very end. Detective series have proliferated on television. An elegant variation on the theme, which involves a scathing exposé of the hypocrisy of British class values at the time of World War I, is the understated, brilliant *Gosford Park* (2001), directed by one of the world's great directors, Robert Altman.

#### *Private Eye (Film Noir)*

Humphrey Bogart as Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep* (1946) is everybody's idea of the private eye. Bogart established the style of the private eye. Again, a popular literary tradition of detective fiction is the source. Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler were detective fiction writers who also wrote Hollywood scripts, later followed by Mickey Spillane. A hallmark of the genre is the voice-over narration in the first person by the main character and the wise guy dialogue. *Chinatown* (1974) is a darker variant.

#### *Disaster Movies*

*Airport* (1970), *Towering Inferno* (1974), *Virus* (1995), *Volcano* (1997), *Armageddon* (1998)—they favor one-word titles. The city, the country, the world (choose one) is threatened by a natural force that transforms someone into a hero as he orchestrates the struggle to save the world in clipped and tense dialogue and reminds us of the place of man in the scheme of things. The latest is *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004). It is interesting to compare this with the real tsunami of December in that year which killed hundreds of thousands of people in the Indian Ocean basin.

### *Martial Arts*

The martial arts movie is really about a theme. The theme crops up in other genre and probably began with the Samurai movies of the great Japanese director Akira Kurosawa. A great example is his movie about a young man learning Judo in *Sugata Sanshiro* (1943) and *The Seven Samurai* (1954), which was adapted into a western in the United States, *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), produced by and starring Yul Brynner. The Hong Kong movie industry developed the kung-fu genre, which focused on the set piece dueling of good and bad guys. It has come to depend on a single actor/martial arts practitioner, the model being Bruce Lee. Other actor/martial artists have movies built around them, including Jackie Chan, Chuck Norris and Steven Segal. The fighting style has now invaded many other types of movies; James Bond movies, police stories, and action-adventure movies incorporate it, not to mention television series such as *Walker*, *Texas Ranger* and *Martial Law*.

### *Epics*

*Ben Hur* (1959), *Spartacus* (1960), *Cleopatra* (1963), and *Gladiator* (2000) have led to more sword and sandal works, this time, renditions of ancient history in *Troy* (2004), which is based on the mother of all epics, Homer's *Iliad*, and *Alexander* (2004). These films usually involve historical settings and historical characters whose lives affected millions or who are affected by great historical events. The plot usually involves battles, armies, and national destinies. They are always big budget entertainment spectacles often with a peripatetic storyline. They are difficult to write and difficult to produce.

### *Action-Adventure*

*Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), *Romancing the Stone* (1984), and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989) are some of the recent examples of a genre that probably originates from literary works like H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, which was made into a movie in 1937 and 1950 with excellent results each time. Then there is Tarzan from the novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs, which spawned an endless number of Hollywood movies and was remade lovingly by Hugh Hudson as *Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes* (1984). These are all stories of fantasy and fiction tenuously connected to reality.

### *Monster Movies*

Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818) is the great ancestor of all monster movies. Monster movies always involve some creature, either man-made or a mutant human. There is *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which involves again the theme of the mad scientist whose knowledge leads to unpredictable and frightening results. It becomes a kind of parable about the fear of knowledge as power, leading to unintended consequences when man interferes with nature. The genre reached network television in *Beauty and the Beast* (1987) with a story about a cultivated lion-man, who

lives in a subterranean society of outcasts, and his love relationship with a beautiful New York District Attorney. It presents interesting parables about sexuality and innocence.

### *Satire*

*American Psycho* (2000), adapted from a novel by Brett Easton Ellis, although crossed with the horror movie theme of a psychotic serial killer, is really a social satire and an attack on male culture and attitudes. *Cannibal Women in the Avocado Jungle of Death* (1988), one of my favorite bad movies, is a camped-up satire on contemporary gender issues starring Bill Maher, later the star of *Politically Incorrect*, the late night television show. A satire of the private eye film noir movie is *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* (1987) in which Humphrey Bogart appears by virtue of clever intercutting of classic film footage.

Movies can also be hybrids that combine more than one type of genre. For instance, *The Mummy* (1999) is a combination of action-adventure, monster, and horror. Some writers and directors manage to create their own genres. The Woody Allen film *Manhattan* (1979) presents a certain type of character, references to movies and relationships, therapists, and so on. His type of movie is almost a genre in itself. Charlie Chaplin was perhaps the first to create a unique character and a genre of his own.

## Script Development

### *Adapting the 7-Step Method*

It is probably true to say that the 7-step method is most useful when applied to corporate communications. The communication problem of entertainment is more elusive. The basic communication problem is that potentially huge audiences want to be entranced, made to laugh, cry, or wonder. They don't know how, and they don't know exactly what they want. They just want something that is going to work for them. They want an end result that is satisfying. Since we cannot interview individuals, and since most people don't know what they want to see until the day of their choice, it is very difficult to answer question number one except in the most general terms. If Hollywood could find the answer they would be able to avoid the risk entailed in every film production.

Question number two, which asks us to define the target audience, helps a great deal more because we need to think about our audience. Some choices are obvious. If children are the target, or teenagers, or a general audience, we know how to write differently for them. Audience demographics are very important. It is easier to measure at the front end than at the back end of the process. As a writer you must be a million people who all want to see your movie.

What is the objective? It is, in Hollywood terms, always, to entertain. If you are writing comedy, the objective is to make people laugh. If you are writing suspense,

the objective is to make people sit on the edge of their seats. As you write or in revision, you can evaluate what you have written by reference to this objective.

The strategy which is the answer to the “how” question in effect becomes comedy, tragedy, suspense, or other mode of engaging the audience. It is about how you are going to entertain them, how you are going to make them laugh or cry. So in some sense, the strategy becomes the premise that we discuss below.

The content is the story line, the narrative, or what will become the treatment. What will happen in the movie?

The medium is going to be film or television, but there is a difference between theatrical film and television film, between multi-camera live-to-tape sitcom and single camera recording whether on film or video. This is important for scripting.

The seventh step, which is the creative concept, is the premise. Getting to the premise is a lot of work. Getting it clear, getting it right is half the battle. Setting it down in such a way as to attract development money is to embody all the six previous steps in one compelling outline.

Scripts are developed through a three-stage process similar to the one we examined for the shorter film and video formats. The concept and premise is the first job of writing. Although storylines and premises are sometimes invented by actors, producers, directors, and studio executives, a writing skill is needed to set one down in a convincing form that everyone can study and discuss. Most projects begin as a concept in the writer’s imagination. Either the project gets written on spec, as they say, or it gets financed, in which case it has to be sold by pitching it to a decision maker who will finance the development. The concept and the pitch are really about the premise.

### *The Premise*

A premise—a shorthand way of referring to the essence of the story idea—can be summed up in a phrase or a few sentences. A great deal of business is done on the basis of pitching a premise. You can think of it this way: if a friend who had not seen a movie that you had seen asked you what a movie was about, what would be your answer? At the moment, you probably don’t make a supreme effort to capture the essential driving idea. You just say something like, *I liked it. It’s about this guy who . . .* Now imagine that instead of telling a friend, you have to tell someone about a movie that hasn’t yet been made and needs a million dollars to develop the script and another \$30 or \$40 million to produce. The premise has to be the idea that defines a movie, the reason for writing it, and the reason for making it. Ultimately, the reason for writing it and the reason for making it have to be congruent.



Sometimes, the premise can almost be the title itself. Some argued that Paul Schrader’s movie *American Gigolo* (1980)<sup>10</sup> based on his script, contains the premise in the title. The idea of a male prostitute sets up a tension with the idea of the American maleness. It also explores an interesting gender issue of male sex for hire. His lover, a senator’s wife, has to provide an alibi for him when he is suspected

of murdering one of his clients. It is a nice irony that Richard Gere plays opposite Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman* (1990) a decade later in the moral mirror image of this sentimental sex fantasy. In any case, the title and the premise should connect with one another.

Later we will discuss *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) and *Bartleby* (1970). The premise for the first might go like this: A decent man, pushed to suicide by bad luck, is saved by an angel who grants him the wish that he had never been born. Seeing how altered the lives of people he cared about would be in that alternative reality, he begs to reverse the wish and is reconciled with his wonderful life. The premise for the second might be: A social drop-out takes passive resistance to the ultimate conclusion in a battle of wits with his employer who, trying to save him, then rejecting him, cannot get rid of him and ends by feeling guilt and responsibility for his death.

The premise is really the cinematic idea that forms itself in the writer's imagination. When it won't go away and cannot be ignored, it should be written. This is the seed idea. This seed of a screenplay has to be grown through stages into a finished production-ready script.

### *Log Lines*

The log line is a term you will often hear mentioned in the movie business. It is an even more concentrated form of the premise. It is a short statement that sums up the movie, a kind of teaser to make someone think about the script and ultimately to read it. It is often the means by which an agent, a producer, or a studio decision maker will be introduced to your script and, according to many, the basis for any decision to read further. From your point of view, your script is unique. From the industry point of view, your script is one of dozens that someone has to sort through and make decisions about recommending it to others for consideration. Given a problem of choice, human psychology typically approaches the problem by eliminating the also-rans, whether it is choosing clothes, vacation destinations, or job applicants. So most people agree that the log line has a primary function of ensuring that your script gets read and considered.

A log line is also really the foundation for a pitch—the verbal presentation of the project in a meeting. You may pitch your own script but it is also highly likely to be someone else on your behalf such as an agent, or a producer trying to raise finance for the project, or a studio executive who believes in the script and needs to persuade others. So the log line actually continues to work for you and your script by supplying others with a ready made handle for your script. In recent years, a few web sites have emerged that serve as market places and bazaars for independent producers to search for interesting new talent and new scripts. Once again, the log line does duty as the pocket version of the script that allows an interested party to make a preliminary decision. Sometimes, this is to do with genre. If you are a producer looking for a kung-fu action story, you do not want to be bothered with romantic comedies. You cannot always tell from the title alone.

The log line has become a minor art form almost. Many professional writers and others concerned with creating entertainment content for the media argue that if you cannot sum up your script or movie idea in, say, three sentences, you don't truly know what your screenplay is about. Can it be two or could it be four sentences? That's not really the point. It has to be short, pithy, express the essence of the story, and make someone want to read further.

A log line:

- Has to be in the present tense, as always. It is as if you are seeing it now before your eyes on a screen.
- Has to identify the genre for the reason given above.
- Has to establish a main character and that character's problem or challenge.
- Has to show a conflict or a situation that will drive the story.
- Should suggest a climax and a resolution or denouement.
- Doesn't have to do the above in any particular order.

We can take a movie title that we know and construct a log line for it: The premise of the movie is as follows:

*The Bachelor* (1999)

After his marriage proposal is rejected by his girlfriend, who then leaves on a trip, a man finds out that he has twenty-four hours before his thirtieth birthday the next day to find a woman to marry him, which is his grandfather's condition for inheriting \$100 million. After he exhausts his list of old girlfriends, his friends and relatives try to fix him up to save the company and their jobs by putting an ad in the paper. A thousand would-be brides show up to be married, chasing the hero until he is reunited with his girlfriend who returns from a trip oblivious of what has happened.

From this would come a shorter, pithy and concentrated essence of the movie, we call a log line:

One thousand brides. One hundred million dollars. Jimmie Shannon is about to discover the true value of love.

*Tag Lines*

A tag line is really the postproduction cousin of the log line. It is created after production in the distribution phase to market the movie. It is usually shorter than a log line so that it can appear in advertising copy. It is a provocative phrase that sums up the audience interest or the way the audience might respond to the premise. So it often has an oblique relation to the premise. It is designed to make you curious and to want to see the movie: "In space nobody can hear you scream" (*Alien*, 1979). It is the kind of writing that goes with creating the trailer for a movie. It's the line you will find on the poster or on the DVD cover. *Shattered Glass* (2003) has: "Read between the lies."

### *Concept or Synopsis*

The concept is a statement of the premise of the movie stated in a few paragraphs or, at most, a page. From this essential idea, the drama or comedy must unfold. The idea can be very simple, but it must somehow be unassailable. It compels us to want to follow the idea to some necessary conclusion. Sometimes, the same or a similar premise can lead to different movies with different outcomes. Many argue that there are only a limited number of plots. All movies are just variations of this finite pool of story lines. This has led to the development of story engine software such as Dramatica Pro, which tests out story concepts and develops a storyline and characters out of the premise.

A good example of a concept might be this: A guy makes a bet with a friend that the friend cannot seduce a certain woman. Although the romance starts out as a bet, it turns serious when the guy really falls in love with the woman he has to seduce. She finds out about the bet by accident and is heartbroken. How does it end? In fact, several movies have been built on this same premise. Although the premise is the same, the movies are quite different in time, place, and character. One is the classic, worldly French film *Les Grands Manoeuvres* (1955), directed by René Clair with Gérard Philipe and Michèle Morgan. Another is the commercial Hollywood comedy *Worth Winning* (1989), starring Mark Harmon and Leslie Anne Warren.

In the French film, the setting is nineteenth-century provincial France. The guy is a French cavalry officer and a lady's man. In the officer's mess, while drinking and fooling around, he accepts a bet from a fellow officer that he cannot seduce a certain lady of the town before the regiment leaves on maneuvers. He woos the lady. She falls in love with him and he with her. One day she comes to the officers' quarters to seek him and overhears the teasing about the bet. She is heartbroken. He doesn't realize she knows. His wooing has become serious. He is no longer interested in the bet. He has fallen in love with her. As the regiment rides out to the cheers of the townsfolk, he looks up anxiously at her window. She is inside in tears. It is tragic, bittersweet, and ironic. The maneuvers of love have parallels to the maneuvers of war, hence the irony of the title. The bet has become a trap.

In the American film, a handsome weatherman who is a bachelor and has enviable success with women is challenged by his married buddy to seduce three women of his choice and get them to accept a marriage proposal and prove it by a certain date. The married buddy's wife happens to own a Picasso, and the wager becomes the painting, unknown to the man's wife. His proof of seduction has to be a videotape of the successful proposal. He really falls in love with the third woman and wants to marry her. The bet catches up with him because the videotape of a previous seduction is seen accidentally, after it is left in the VCR, by his (now) fiancée when she visits the wife of the buddy who made the bet. The women get together to teach him a lesson. At the marriage ceremony, his bride confronts him, refuses him, and exposes his two-timing. He is made to repent. To get her back, he has to allow himself to be auctioned at a charity bachelor auction. His intended bride puts in highest bid. They are reconciled.



You can see the how differently the same premise can be developed and how each movie expresses the varied European and the Hollywood approaches. The same premise lies behind comedy and tragedy. One is nuanced, textured, and ironic. The other is staged, sentimental, and ideological. The European film is an observation about the fickle nature of love and sexual attraction in which there is understanding with a realistic ending and without a moralizing text. The American film reveals a hidden cultural code and a cultural agenda. It is a comedy about the taming of the male fantasy by the female in which there is a moralizing subtext and a sentimental happy ending that saves face. It embodies the subtext of so many American films and television series in which the male is ultimately subject to the female. Recent variants on this classic plot *She's All That* (1999) and *Mean Girls* (2004), are both crossed with another genre, the teen comedy.

### *Story Engines*

Most of the stories in the world can be broken down into a finite number of basic plots with different variations. An American distributor is reported to have said, "Listen, in television and film, there's only one goddamn plot. There's a guy in Zanzibar with a cork up his ass. There's only one guy in the world who can get it out, and he lives in Newark, New Jersey. We spend the next fifty minutes seeing the second guy fighting overwhelming odds to reach the first guy before he dies of toxic poisoning. Okay?"<sup>11</sup>

Ideas about story structure are certainly strong in Hollywood. The pressure to find the magic formula for a successful movie is great. Some might worry that story engines reduce all movies to a limited number of archetypal plots and their variations. If you now see movie storylines and plots starting to resemble one another, it could be because of the search for formulaic stories reduced to archetypes by story engines. Whether it is the use of story engines or the copycat mentality of studios trying to make money by doing their disaster movie or their science fiction adventure of the season, it is hard to know. We all know that there are stereotypes and fads for certain kinds of subject matter. Of course, genres lead to certain predictable storylines whether it is a western or a road movie. We know what we are in for. Even though genre movies have conventions that are understood, there is always room for originality and innovation.

Traditionalists might argue that most of the world's literature and drama has been composed without the benefit of story engines. By the same token, most of the world depended on the horse and buggy rather than the internal combustion engine and the quill pen rather than word processors. It probably boils down to deciding that whatever helps you is a good thing. We owe it to ourselves to examine story engines.

In previous chapters, we have emphasized the importance of the thinking that precedes the writing. Getting to the creative premise, concept or outline and getting it right are fundamental to success. This is what story engines help the writer to do. Story engines analyze plot structures and story elements so that writers can

generate plot possibilities from the premise. Story engines use computing power to examine a huge number of choices that represent permutations and combinations of a similar premise. Story engines rest on certain assumptions about plot and story.<sup>12</sup> Dramatica Pro, which is one of the programs in Screenplay Systems stable of scripting software, rests on a theory of story structure. The software asks questions that lead to a definition of the story type, plot, and characters.

Dramatica Pro could be described as a writer's tool for creating a treatment. Dramatica Pro certainly teaches the user a great deal about how stories work. In it, the StoryGuide is an elaborate process that asks questions about character, story and issues to establish the fundamentals of your story. "Storyforming" deals with "the underlying dramatic skeleton of a story"—the structure, theme and through-line, which can result in 32,768 possible storyforms, presumably the number of permutations and combinations of the archetypal variables. All stories begin with a problem that must be resolved. The theory posits that all stories have 4 through lines. These are:

- the overall story through line
- the main character through line
- the main vs. impact through line
- the impact character's through line

The overall story through line is what the story is about. It involves all the characters. In the example of *Star Wars*, this through line is about a war between the Empire and the Rebellion. It takes place in several locations, but there is always a struggle between the two forces, in some sense a struggle between good and evil. The main character through line is about the problem of the main character and how it drives the story and leads to some resolution. The impact character is not necessarily the antagonist in the classic theory of drama, but a character who makes the main character question his basic assumptions, and therefore choose, act and change. In the Dramatica Pro demo analysis of *Star Wars*, Luke Skywalker is a main character and Obi Wan Kenobe is the impact character. The main versus impact through line charts the conflict—interaction between these two key characters that determines the outcome for each of them.

Storytelling describes characters, their problems, their problem solving style, their actions, their concerns, situation and environment; how things are changing; time and option locks that limit the story and create the drama. By question and answer, the characters and plot are defined and refined. However, the questions have to be very much in the vein of the structural theory that the authors set up behind the software. The software is a patented way of getting someone to think through all the issues of a story.

"Storyweaving" involves creating scenes of specific action from the storyforming and storytelling bank of raw material. The "end result is a complete narrative treatment of your story, a rough first draft if you will." This document can then be



exported to Movie Magic Screenwriter as a formatted screen play or as a novel, or even as a text document for a word processor.

## Writing a Movie Treatment

Once the concept has been accepted, the next stage is to expand the idea into a treatment. We have already defined what a treatment is in the context of writing other types of script. In terms of a film, a treatment is a contractual stage in the writing process that is recognized in the standard contract negotiated by the screenwriters' union, the Writers Guild of America. A treatment for a feature film or a television movie is a substantial document running twenty-five pages or more. The producer who pays for the screenplay usually makes suggestions and requests changes to the story and character development before the first draft screenplay is commissioned. Of course, treatments, like screenplays, are also written on "spec", that is, without payment.

A treatment for a film script is a prose narrative of the main storyline (in chronological order) with characters described and occasional samples of dialogue. A movie treatment should be a complete account of what happens, a complete storyline, and a readable narrative that looks forward to the script. A treatment is written in conventional narrative prose without any special formatting, but always in the present tense.

The purpose of the treatment is to allow producers, directors, studio executives, or whoever is going to pay for the script, to evaluate the story and its entertainment potential. It serves the purpose of getting the writer to show his hand and tell the story. It also allows all of the aforementioned people who have a say in the creation of the final product to react to an early version and respond with comments, concerns, and encouragement. The treatment is less expensive to create than the script. It is, if you like, a prototype for the script that enables everyone to test out how it will play. It is a lot easier to revise a treatment than a script just as it is a lot easier to revise a concept than a treatment.

Another way of understanding what a treatment is would be to ask what is missing from it that will eventually be delivered in the screenplay or script based on it. The first and foremost missing element is dialogue. The exact words to be spoken by all the characters are essential to the screenplay, but not to the treatment. Every scene to be shot must be described in the screenplay, but not necessarily in the treatment. Major scenes and major actions are going to form part of the treatment. The supporting scenes and the detail of many scenes only come to the fore in the script. Because a screenplay describes every scene and every word spoken, it decides the pacing and flow of the movie. This cannot be delineated precisely in the treatment.

If we go back to the blueprint analogy of Chapter 1, then the treatment could be roughly compared to the sketches of the finished building. The script is the

equivalent of detailed drawings in plan, elevation, and section that provide exact dimensions. The sketch allows you to see what the building will look like and appreciate many of its features. The plans allow you to know how large the living room is and how many bedrooms there are. Above all, it allows the builder to build it just as the screenplay allows the director to shoot the movie.

## Screenplay

A screenplay or script is the translation of the treatment into a visual blueprint for production, laying end to end the particular scenes employing the specific descriptive language of the medium to describe what is to be seen on the screen and heard on the sound track. This means the action and its background and each new character in the scene must be delineated. Every word of dialogue must be written down. Every scene must be described. The scene is the basic unit of visual narrative for the screenplay and the writer who writes it, whereas the shot is the basic unit of narrative for the camera and the director who shoots the movie. Why do we say, “shoot a movie?” The verb, shoot, corresponds to the noun, shot. A movie is made out of shots. Figure 9.1 shows standard margins and the layout of the page for a screenplay.

This transition from scene to shot is the last barrier between the writing and the making of the movie. The director has to compose the scene out of shots. This means a director has to create a shooting script out of a screenplay.

Although writers may indicate the importance of certain camera shots (always capitalized) and certain transitions from scene to scene (CUT TO, DISSOLVE TO), the director has both the right and the responsibility to break down the scene into camera setups or shots that will cover the action of the scene. A director must shoot the same scene from several angles so that action and dialogue are repeated in different camera angles in order for the editor to create continuity. Without this “cover”, a scene cannot be edited. This thinking about setups is not really part of the writer’s thought process. The screenplay is the writer’s construction of the sequence of scenes in the order and length that will make the story come alive. Although the writer may dip into detailing a shot for particular emphasis—for instance, to describe a CUTAWAY that carries dramatic and visual significance—as a rule, the writer leaves shots to the director.

To pursue the blueprint analogy to the bitter end, it would make sense to say that the shooting script is the plan for the builder. It gets down to a list of shots. This list of shots makes up the shooting schedule and leads to each individual camera setup that defines the method of working. This is why the director is so important to a movie production, or indeed any production, because it is the director who makes that final translation of words describing visuals on paper to images in a moving picture medium by means of camera set ups in shooting and scenes edited together in post production.



of time or place, the scene changes. It is the sequence of scenes that tell the story. The audience only experiences what is enacted in the given scenes. If you can put a skeleton narrative together by means of brief scene summaries, you have a solid structure for a screenplay. Each scene should have a key moment. The key moment is really the distilled moment or action that advances the narrative. Lots of scenes are possible, even probable, but not necessarily essential to the hundred-minute story.

One way to think of this narrative skill is to ask what you see rather than what you hear. On the whole, narrative unfolds through action and choices of the principal characters rather than what they say. It is probably preferable to see it first and hear it second. In other words, narrate through action. Or put another way, try to show the story rather than tell the story. At least, show and tell. Nevertheless, most scenes need dialogue.

## Master Scene Script Format

The master scene script is the accepted format that is now well understood and accepted in the industry. It has very clear conventions. It is best understood by looking at the sample page in Figure 9.1. The description of action and character behavior runs from margin to margin. Character names are always capitalized and centered. Dialogue is separated from action under the name of the character speaking. Dialogue margins are set within the margins for action. It is a way of organizing visual narrative on the page to show scenes. Every scene begins with a slug line. Each slug line announces a new scene because of change of place or time. The slug line abbreviates the information summarizing whether the shoot is inside or outside, where it is, and whether it is day or night. The slug line is always in caps. The action is described in lower case and single-spaced. If the scene contains dialogue, the character's name is centered in the middle of the page and typed in caps. Dialogue is written in lower case and single-spaced. The breaks between slug lines and action or between action and character name are double-spaced. The breaks between scenes are twice that. Doing all this on a typewriter involves considerable typing skills with tab settings and spacing. This job is made very easy by current scriptwriting software systems.

## Scripting Software

With the advent of computers and word processing, formatting a script has become nearly effortless. Not only does dedicated scriptwriting software take the chore out of formatting the page by providing macro key strokes to create slug lines or keeping lists of characters in memory, it has become an industry requirement. Script formatting software provides an easily manageable computer file that can be imported into scheduling and budgeting software that simplifies a difficult and costly



preproduction task. A writer must adopt one of the accepted screenplay formatting software systems.

## Conclusion

We now see that the stages of development of a script are similar for most uses of the linear visual media we have discussed so far, whether PSAs, corporate videos, or feature films. In fact, we need to bring forward everything we have learned from Chapters 2, 3, and 4. We need to describe one medium through another. We need to be able to define the problem in terms of entertainment.

In writing for entertainment media, the problem is a plot problem or character problem in the form of a premise that will intrigue and hold an audience. So the objective is now entertainment for its own sake. It is a loose term. Fictional narrative in visual media has to be believable or, if not believable in the realistic sense, then seductive. A fantasy world, whether animation or science fiction or even a mixture of live action and animation (see, for example, *The Mask*, 1994), has to work for the audience.

Knowing who the audience is for entertainment subjects is an art, not a science. Many studio executives have been humbled and unknowns vindicated in the unpredictable judgment of the box office. Legion are the stories of scripts turned down by one studio or producer only to be made into gigantic successes by another. Small independent, low-budget films that nobody expects to do well end up capturing huge audiences. The British film *The Full Monty* (1997) defied the usual Hollywood formula for a big box office success. This film has now become adapted as a musical set in Buffalo. *Billy Elliot* (2000) is yet another—about a young boy in a coal mining town, who wants to become a ballet dancer. It is safe to say that these films would never have been made at all by standard Hollywood practice. They are full of local British accents and have no American stars. For some reason, the two stories and situations struck a chord with a huge American audience.

We now have an overview of the forms and structures and a broad understanding of the stages of the process of developing a story and a screenplay: premise, log line, concept, treatment, first draft script or screenplay, followed by a second draft. This process has contractual stages recognized in the industry. In the next chapters, we need to examine some of the specific problems and creative techniques of the scriptwriting process.

## Exercises

1. Watch a movie and summarize the conflict that lies at the root of the plot.
2. Everybody in your class is to think up an idea for a movie and then pitch those ideas to the rest of the class. Take a straw vote to get an instant reaction to the ideas: If class members were in control of a production budget, would they commit development money for the script based on the pitch?

3. Write a list of five conflicts—physical, moral, or historical—that could be the source of a dramatic movie.
4. Write a list of conflicts that could be the source of a comedic movie.
5. Consider three movies that you know and write a paragraph about the premise of each.
6. Develop one of your ideas of conflict into a premise for a movie.
7. Write a scene for your premise that is action only without dialogue.
8. Write a scene for your premise with dialogue.
9. Write a treatment for a feature-length movie based on your premise.
10. List three of your favorite movies and then write a new log line for each.
11. Take a movie you know well and outline its three-act structure.
12. Take the plot of *Little Red Riding Hood* and rework it as horror movie with different characters but the same plot.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>This type of mix-up was part of the fun in the Academy Award-winning movie *Shakespeare in Love* (1998).

<sup>2</sup>For those who want to bypass serious background reading, the film *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) paints a picture of the trials of the new medium, although its tale of Shakespeare is wholly fictional and improbable.

<sup>3</sup>Consult their web site: <http://www.writersguild.org/>.

<sup>4</sup>Hollywood has had a field day with the findings of a literary critic Joseph Campbell in his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); reprinted in paperback.

<sup>5</sup>A valuable critique of the traditional three-act structure and an examination of other narrative strategies for film is to be found in *Alternative Scriptwriting*, 2nd ed., by Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush (Boston: Focal Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup>The script adaptation was written by an important modern British playwright, John Osborne, and directed by Tony Richardson. It won the Oscar for best picture and a nomination for best screenplay and a host of other awards in 1963. See <http://uk.imdb.com/Title?0057590>.

<sup>7</sup>Act II, scene ii.

<sup>8</sup>See <http://uk.imdb.com/Title?0102798>.

<sup>9</sup>Please consult the very complete online database (<http://uk.imdb.com/>) of movies for credits and plot summaries of all the movies mentioned.

<sup>10</sup>You can see a trailer of the movie through a hyperlink in the CD-ROM or by pointing your browser to <http://us.imdb.com/Trailers?0080365&546&56>.

<sup>11</sup>Reported by Eric Paice in *The Way to Write for Television* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1981), p. 8.

<sup>12</sup>Melanie Anne Phillips and Chris Huntley are the authors of the Dramatica theory of story.

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# 10

## Writing Techniques for Long Form Scripts

So far we have outlined the broad process of developing and writing without going into the craft of how you do it. Many good books are dedicated to writing for the movies and for television that expound on techniques and share the tricks of the trade. This chapter is just an introduction to basics on which the student must build. In other words, if you have never written a screenplay or tried to conceptualize a narrative in a visual medium that lasts for an hour and a half or two hours, here are some of the issues you need to think about.

At the beginning of Chapter 3, we said that a writer is paid for the quality of thinking as much as for the writing. Writing screenplays is not about putting words on paper so much as thinking out storylines, visualizing scenes, and imagining characters. Although we can identify elements of the screenplay form, singly, none of them will make a screenplay. Put together, they pretty much cover those issues the scriptwriter has to think about and for which he has to execute technically a finished working vehicle that will manifest in actors' performances and directors' shots. We are talking about creating a complex structure that you can travel through or examine from a number of different points of view. Let's start with character.

### Characters and Character

Every story must have at least one character whose identity is clear and whose destiny is engaging. Otherwise, we, the audience, have nothing to relate to and identify with. Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* pits one man against the sea, the elements, and the great fish that he struggles to bring in. We identify with his struggle, his hunger, and his fatigue. Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* is a more complex story of Captain Ahab against the white whale. The genre probably goes back to heroic, mythical stories such as the Anglo-Saxon Beowulf and St. George

against the dragon. A more recent version of this archetype is *Jaws* (1975), in which the animal adversary is replaced by a Great White shark. This has spawned a host of similar beast and monster movies based on the premise of a confrontation with an outsize animal opponent such as an alligator or a giant squid.

Normally, we assume characters to be human, but in this genre the animal is a character in the story with personified characteristics of will, motive and intelligence. Don't tell me animals are not characters! A whole franchise, as they call it nowadays, was built around a sheepdog, Lassie. Dozens of *Lassie* movies were made, and a television series of the same name ran for many seasons. Don't tell me characters have to have lines! Lassie barks, no lines. Think of *Frankenstein*! There's another character without lines and also a variation on the theme.

Most stories need more than one human character. They need a protagonist and an antagonist, or a hero and a villain. The struggle between them is typical of archetypal stories. Think of Achilles and Hector in Homer's *Iliad*, Julius Caesar and Brutus, or Octavius Caesar and Cleopatra, or Grant and Lee in the Civil War. There are usually two points of view or two sets of values that define each character. In its most commonplace and generic version, we have the cop and the criminal. Then there are the hero's friends, lover, parents, children, and all those possible relationships that fill out the plot. The list of characters makes up the cast.

What makes characters interesting to an audience? A character has to be someone the audience can identify or with whom the audience can identify. What's the difference? Who identifies with Hannibal Lector in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991)? On the other hand, you recognize him as a fascinating psychotic personality, but you identify with the vulnerable young FBI agent, Clarice, who must navigate the mind games of the imprisoned cannibal for clues to capture a serial killer. This identification has nothing to do with gender. Her problem—to pluck knowledge out of danger—involves the audience, and makes them feel concern for her predicament and want her to succeed.

The more subtle idea of character has to do with characteristics—the inner and outer nature of a person that define who they are. A writer has to give character to his characters. He has to differentiate them and give them identities that make sense for the story and the world in which they live. The audience has to believe in the characters. A writer has to create that believable reality in act and speech. To do that, a writer has to think about the name of the character, the character's background and life story, so that he or she comes to life on the page and on the screen. That means hearing how the characters speak (what voice do they have?), seeing how they walk, and imagining their hopes and fears.

## Dialogue and Action

The two engines of story are dialogue and action. Dialogue must not drive the story; rather, the story must drive the dialogue. When characters speak, they define

who they are. Their words can also give forward momentum to the story. Dialogue spoken by characters must be essential to the plot and essential to their character. So when George Bailey makes his impassioned speech at the board meeting in *It's a Wonderful Life*,<sup>1</sup> he expresses himself as a right-thinking, ethical character and sets in motion his own appointment to the Manager's position of the savings and loan of Bedford Falls and the second frustration of his lifelong dream to travel, this time on his honeymoon.

The unit of composition in a screenplay is the scene. It has unity of time and place. Each scene must contribute to the necessary structure of the story. In the economy of the screenplay, a scene has to be a key moment. If it is not, it is not necessary and should not be there. If a scene can be defined as a key moment in the story, then the dialogue should be only what is necessary to carry the scene. It is no trouble to put words into the mouths of characters. Before you know it, your character is talking the screenplay and what is worse, talking the plot. As a rule, avoid having characters explain the plot; rather, let them speak from within the fiction. This goes back to Aristotle's criticism of the *deus ex machina* as a device. If characters talk about the plot, it destroys conviction. This is a common fault in suspense and mystery dramas, which can only be resolved by someone explaining the ambiguities that result from tying the story in knots.

Characters interact with their environment or with other characters by making choices and doing things that have consequences. In fact, *It's a Wonderful Life* turns on the choice to live or not to live (Hamlet's "to be or not to be"). This moves the story forward. Events in nature or in history act on characters such that they must change or perhaps die. The action that takes place is not dependent on dialogue. In the best writing, dialogue complements action. Dialogue creates the understanding of action. Action creates the context for dialogue. Dialogue must advance the action or plot. They work together. Sometimes, dialogue is more important, sometimes action. In film, the narrative must be told by visual events as much as by the words characters speak.

When a character does speak, the dialogue must define something about the character, or at least be consistent with the character and appropriate to the moment. This brings us to a question of realism. Most people can write down words and phrases that are a plausible representation of the way people speak. The trouble is, the way people speak is usually long-winded, rambling, disjointed, repetitious, and boring. To check this out, take a tape recorder into the cafeteria. Listen to people conversing on a bus or subway. Listening in on a telephone conversation (cell phones sometimes give us no choice) reveals speech that is the opposite of film dialogue. It goes nowhere. So strict realism is going to kill the screenplay.

Dialogue in films and television has to be realistic, not real. That means characters have to speak in character, have to be believable, and have to sound as if they are real. In actual fact, such lines are carefully crafted and edited to carry the plot and to convince the audience from moment to moment that the illusion is reality. We expect a doctor in *ER* to talk like a doctor, or a nurse to talk like a nurse.



We do not, for the sake of a moment, want to spend a day in a hospital hearing all the inconsequential utterances of an intern or ward physician. You can hang around a hospital emergency room for days and not experience anything that would be exciting enough for a television show. Perhaps you have had the misfortune to have to go to a hospital emergency room either for yourself or with someone else. It is really dull. To make an interesting television show about a hospital, you have to graft many separate moments together. You have to create an interaction of characters that will bridge imagination and reality. You exaggerate; you heighten; you intensify. If characters still get to say ordinary things, they do so while racing down the corridor with a gurney or answering the phone while looking at a lab workup on the patient.

What does movie dialogue do for the plot and the character? Compared to novels and even stage plays, movie dialogue is sparse. The reason should be apparent from the experience of going to the movies. The most successful way to tell a story on screen is by showing characters in situations or doing things that explain implicitly what is going on in the story, rather than showing characters jawboning with one another. When they do speak, the exchange has to be necessary to the moment, to the plot, and to the revelation of that character. So dialogue explains character, advances the plot, and clues in the audience.

One mistake beginners often make is to have characters make set speeches. Another is to gum up the forward motion of the movie with tedious small talk. It may be realistic and just the way people talk, but movies are not realistic. They condense life into key moments. Total realism would be unbearable. People have to sleep, eat, and go to the bathroom. They have to ride the subway, take a bus, or drive for half an hour to get somewhere. No one is going to pay money to see a truly realistic movie. Remember that Andy Warhol made an 8-hour movie of someone sleeping. That's realism. You could not survive without sleep, but sleep is not entertainment. In fact, it is the opposite. We all use the expression, "puts me to sleep," to register that something is the opposite of entertaining.

What we feel to be realistic is a true representation of a moment of human experience. We accept the moment of fear, the moment of doubt, the moment of emotional expression, or the embarrassment of a comic predicament as convincing. So from moment to moment, the prevailing style of movies is to craft dialogue to sound natural and to show characters in offices or homes that are plausible. If you analyze the moment, it is a key moment stripped of excess action and dialogue so that we understand in that moment what went before and what consequences are likely to follow. Most of what we are saying applies to television as well, with the exception of sitcoms.

On the other hand, the drive to condense plot and make dialogue as dramatically efficient as possible leads to a number of recognizable clichés. For example, detectives striding purposely through a building issuing serious sounding orders, while another character enters and delivers a realistic comment about what forensics found

out about the murder weapon, all shot in a sweeping, fast-moving Steadicam shot with background action that tells us we are in a police precinct. We end up in an office. The character grabs some coffee. The phone rings. A psychotic serial killer calls in a taunt. Trace that phone call! Or a new piece of information is delivered to set up the next stage of the plot. Rewrite the same cliché and we are in a hospital corridor going into emergency, going up the steps of a courtroom, striding through an office at the Pentagon, tracking into an airport disaster room, at a fire—you name it. That is not how it really happens. It is a movie and TV convention for condensing the action and the dialogue.

Think how movie dialogue writing evolved. It began as title cards for silent movies interspersed with images of characters or action. The words to be read by the audience had to capture key moments, key sentiments that would support the scene of intense looks and silently moving lips. From the beginning, movies had to reduce dialogue to the essential. If you compare older movies with today's product, you generally find that they are verbose. With the invention of synchronized sound, the "talkies" seemed to lean on the theatrical tradition again. Actors who looked good, but couldn't deliver a line, were replaced by actors capable of delivering dialogue, often trained in the theatre. Writers could go to town on the dialogue because hearing actors speak in lip sync while seeing them on screen was a novelty that exploited the new technology. Writing dialogue is an art. The words a character speaks can be ambiguous, nuanced, and mask who he or she really is. Such is the dialogue of Hannibal Lector, for instance, as is the dialogue of Hamlet.

The danger of dialogue is that you talk the plot. This frequently happens in suspense thrillers and murder mysteries in which the audience is kept guessing. There is frequently a key scene at the end in which the culprit is confronted and the hero talks through the explanation of how he figured out the truth. *Columbo*, the television series, consistently resolves the crime story in that way. You could argue that it was successful and that Peter Falk became a popular television character. Styles change. One of the great innovations in movie dialogue writing and delivery was brought about by Robert Altman through his movie, *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970).<sup>2</sup>

Later, that movie was spun off into a television sitcom. Until *M\*A\*S\*H*, characters spoke in turn. In real life, people hesitate, interrupt one another, talk at the same time, and overlap one another. Altman broke the old convention, and movies have never been the same since. We now hear more realistic speech with interruptions, half-finished thoughts, and speech fragments. We also get uninhibited vernacular speech that includes four letter words that were formerly anathema.

Filmmakers soon learned that it was more interesting to tell a story through action and images rather than theatrical speech. Early scriptwriters got the point.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, in television soaps, most of the narrative is conveyed by duologues between two characters in medium shots and close-ups. They never stop talking. Talk is cheap. It just needs a few basic sets and a team of writers compared to

movie locations and special effects, stunts, car wrecks, and exploding buildings. In the contemporary Hollywood movie, dialogue must carry its weight in describing character and advancing the story for the audience. This is particularly true of action films. Classic novels by writers such as Jane Austen and Henry James that are adapted for the screen usually allow lengthier dialogue. One reason is that green berets and kung-fu masters are not prone to extensive verbal communication, whereas a nineteenth-century lady or gentleman with an education is more eloquent. It fits the character. Then again, there are exceptions like Woody Allen films, which thrive on verbal interaction between characters. The Woody Allen talk is part of the character.

It's easy to write dialogue. It's hard to write good dialogue. Almost anybody can string together an exchange between characters. The difficult part is to develop an ear for the way words will play so that a character speaks consistently, so that an audience will believe in the character, and so that the lines don't slow down the movie. Remember that words take up time. Lots of words take up lots of time. What is your character doing while speaking? The dialogue has to fit the action and the circumstance. It has to fit the character so that a college professor doesn't talk like a shoe salesman, a teenager doesn't talk like an adult, a Boston banker doesn't talk like a Southern farmer. Not everybody can find the words that sound right. You have to be observant of people and develop an ear for speech. Since most stories involve conflict, struggle, love, revenge, mistakes, or comic embarrassment, dialogue often expresses emotions. Writers have to find the words that fit the emotion.

## Plot or Storyline

The plot seems to be the mechanism that most of us see as the embedded structure of the screenplay and movie. It is somewhat like a skeleton. By itself it can't stand up. It needs muscles and ligaments and a life force to animate the total organism. So the plot or storyline is one way of looking at the animal. What happens in what order? The way you arrange the sequence of scenes determines the way the story unfolds. That is important.

A plot is really the sequence of actions that traces out a progression of events. This constructed sequence distills the essence of life and shows us something about the way life works. When Polonius hides behind the arras or curtain to eavesdrop on Queen Gertrude's meeting with Hamlet, he creates a circumstance that leads to Hamlet reacting defensively to stab him through the curtain, thinking or perhaps hoping that it is his uncle Claudius, murderer of his father. Because it is Polonius, the plot intensifies and complicates things for other characters. Laertes now has to avenge his father's death. Hamlet has killed the father of the woman he probably loves but cannot acknowledge, Ophelia. Hamlet himself is now in greater danger because of his risky action. Claudius is very much alive and now fearful of Hamlet and therefore much more dangerous. So one action sends stress lines into every

corner of the play. The tension is heightened. More action must follow. Choices and actions in life are usually less dramatic but the choices of yesterday lead us to where we are today. Even if characters are not tomb raiding, saving the world from asteroids, or trying to defuse a bomb, they are always making choices. The choices they make spring from their values and their nature as characters, which then lead to consequences, another scene, and so the story moves forward.

## Comedy

Writing funny lines as you devise comic situations is another challenge. Comedy depends on action as well. Even if it is not slapstick action, it requires physical situations in which characters have to confront embarrassing situations and act in outrageous ways. Comedy requires conflict as much as tragedy. Whereas the tension that arises from conflict in tragedy is released in violence and suffering, the tension that arises from comedy is released in laughter. Silent film developed a visual vocabulary for comedy. Obviously, the slapstick traditions of vaudeville translated to film. The difference is that film had to develop stories not stage acts. The master of this new form, Charlie Chaplin, was writer, director, and star. In *The Gold Rush* (1925), the tramp is trapped inside a cabin in a snowstorm in Alaska with a huge, ugly fat man. They have no food. You could just as well imagine this premise as a survival drama. You have seen dozens of them on film and television. The big man starts seeing Chaplin as a meal, hallucinating that he is a large chicken. Chaplin sets about his own survival. He boils his boots for dinner and makes us laugh while he treats the shoelaces as spaghetti and sucks the nails like chicken bones.

Situations of physical danger lend themselves equally well to suspense that is dramatic and suspense that is hilarious. Later in *The Gold Rush*, the cabin is teetering on the edge of a cliff where it has been blown by the storm. The movement of the occupants threatens doom at every moment, obliging them to cooperate in order to escape. Some of you may have seen the Harold Lloyd silent comedy in which he is clinging to the hands of a clock on a clock tower. As the hands move, he is in constant danger of falling, but he miraculously avoids it. The line between comedy and drama is sometimes thin.

## Drama

How many times have you seen a nail-biting scene in which the hero or heroine is hanging by one hand from a building or stuck in a wreck about to fall over a bridge or cliff? Then they slip and fall to the next ledge, or the rescuer seems like he cannot hold on. The scene is milked for suspense, but you don't laugh like you do at Harold Lloyd. Why? There's the difference between comedy and drama. Such a scene is written and played for tension and suspense. The premise is identical to the

premise for comic disaster. Drama means conflict, high emotion, and usually action. Suspense drama turns heavily on plot. The consequences of action are critical for life and death, success or failure, so that we worry about what will happen. In comedy, the consequences of action are also critical, but we are allowed to laugh at the victim who represents all of us faced with the indignities of life. Although the premise of comedy and drama may be similar, the outcome is always different—happy as opposed to serious. How is the writing different? Dialogue and character weigh heavily in pushing the concept one way or the other. Comedy requires gags and overreaction. Drama requires tension and conflict.

Although most movies are adapted from some source work, the glory of the medium is the original screenplay. Writing directly for the screen is a great craft and difficult to do well. *Citizen Kane* (1941) is one of the greatest original screenplays ever. It was written by Herman J. Mankiewicz and Orson Welles. Lawrence Kasdan is an accomplished writer/director. His *Body Heat* (1981) is a flawless murder-mystery thriller. Jane Campion wrote and directed *The Piano* (1993) to international acclaim. One of the true talents of movie writing in America is Paul Schrader. His writing and directing credits are numerous and include the original screenplay for Martin Scorsese's classic *Taxi Driver* (1976).<sup>4</sup> My favorite is *Mishima* (1985), about love and honor in a cross-cultural love affair in Japan involving an ex-GI. Don't forget to read William Goldman's original screenplay of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), published in *Adventures in the Screen Trade*,<sup>5</sup> which tells you a lot about working realities for writers in Hollywood.

When you go to the movies, you should watch the screen credits and see who the writer is. See whether it is an original screenplay. Pay attention to the writer and to the writing talent that makes movies possible. Don't be one of those vulgarians who walk out as soon as the credits come on. Although the audience remembers the actors, whose lines we write, maybe the director, whose story we create, they rarely remember the writer. The basis of every movie is a script. Every script is the work of a writer.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, film writing wants to exploit the large screen and the impact of surround sound and to narrate through action rather than dialogue. Writing visually is essential to good film writing. You compose narration out of images. Your story, its characters, and its world live for two hours through the collaboration of vast numbers of talented people in front of and behind the camera who bring the script to life. Film scripts are composed of scenes. Whether films are viewed on the big screen, television, video, or DVD, the experience is not exactly the same. Although films are shown on television all the time, other types of entertainment programming are produced for television only. Writing for television has its own issues and requires its own chapter. Before considering television writing issues,

we should look at the problem of adaptation. It is an important way to understand scriptwriting and an important way to learn how to write for the screen.

## Exercises

1. Write a three- to five-minute scene without dialogue that tells the audience that one character is in love with another. You can explore variations such as one character being in love, but the other rejecting that love.
2. Write a three- to five-minute scene that builds suspense and anticipation.
3. Write a three- to five-minute scene in which no character is allowed more than one line of dialogue.
4. Record a real conversation in the cafeteria or some other public space. Transcribe five minutes of it on paper in screenplay format. See what realism is. Now try to edit the dialogue down to one minute.
5. Edit and rewrite the dialogue you recorded in Exercise 4 to create comedy.
6. Edit and rewrite the dialogue you recorded in Exercise 4 to create drama.
7. Find a novel that has been made into a film and write an analysis of how it has changed for better or worse in the film medium.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>This film is discussed in greater detail in the section on Adaptation. The complete script is on the DVD.

<sup>2</sup>Check out the screenplay by novelist Ring Lardner Jr. (<http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/8200/Mash.txt/>).

<sup>3</sup>Willar King Bradley, *Inside Secrets of Photoplay Writing* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1926): "I once asked David Ward Griffith what he considered the best course for one to pursue in writing for the screen, and he answered, 'Think in Pictures!' He had just completed *The Birth of a Nation*" (p. 33). See also J. Berg Esenwein and Arthur Leeds, *Writing the Photoplay* (Springfield, MA: The Home Correspondence School, 1913): ". . . it is action that is of primary importance. It is what your characters do that counts" (p. 112).

<sup>4</sup>Paul Schrader, *Taxi Driver* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990). See also *Schrader on Schrader & Other Writings*, "Directors on Directors Series," by Paul Schrader, Kevin Jackson (ed.) (London: Faber & Faber, 1992) and *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* by Paul Schrader (London: Faber & Faber, 1988).

<sup>5</sup>William Goldman, *Adventures in the Screen Trade* (New York: Warner Books, 1983).



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# 11

## Writing Techniques for Adaptation

Let us reprise a point we made in Chapter 1, working up an understanding of visual writing, the kind of writing that is special to the screen. We used Hemingway's novel *A Farewell to Arms* to show the difference between prose fiction and screen writing by asking how we would translate the opening descriptive paragraph into a screenplay. We were showing the difference between two types of writing, two types of storytelling. We now need to look at a much bigger issue, which grows out of that initial problem of what you represent in a scene when you adapt a source work for filming. We need to deal with techniques of adaptation.

In the entertainment world, a writer is frequently called upon to adapt his or someone else's work, but adaptation also happens to be a really instructive exercise for the beginner to learn how to write for the screen and to learn the art of visual writing. Adapting can be one of the best ways to appreciate what screen writing is and, by the same token, what prose fiction is. If the storyline and the characters already exist, then the writer can concentrate on the problem of key moments and the two-hour continuum of the movie.

### The Problem of Adaptation

Adaptation presents a special problem of translating one medium to another. Shakespeare, the master dramatist, was also a master adapter. Most of his plays drew from existing literary works. The parallel between the new medium of Elizabethan theater and the new medium of film is revealing. Although many great screenplays have been written originally for the screen, it is probably safe to say that most movies that we see are adapted from source works. They can be novels, short stories, stage plays, musicals, epics, fairy tales and folk tales. You might think that a play is easy to adapt to film because it is made up of dialogue and action, but in a play action takes place on a stage. A movie cannot just film a stage although that is how many early silent movies were shot. People thought in terms of watching

performance on a proscenium stage. It didn't take long for someone to figure out that you could move the camera and liberate the actors from painted scenery. Then camera angles were invented, which necessarily led to the art of cutting shots.

Although the original screenplay is, in a way, the glory of the medium, producers and movie studios look to properties that have succeeded with audiences in other media as a form of insurance. Producing and distributing movies is a high-risk business. Producers will look for any way to reduce the odds and increase the likelihood of recovering their investment. A best-selling novel has a ready-made audience. A Broadway hit has a prior reputation that helps to sell the movie. Successful new works in the theater or in print come with a price. Getting the rights to a John Grisham novel involves competitive bidding against other producers. So the insurance of buying a pre-sold audience and a ready-made story increases production costs and obliges the producers to share profits with the original writer. Increased production costs then demand the security of box office stars and known directors, what is known in Hollywood as "A list talent", which increases the production cost yet again.

For these reasons, and because the rights are in the public domain, producers also look to classic works from Homer through Shakespeare, to Dickens and other classics. Not only are the stories in the public domain and therefore free, but they have withstood the test of time and held audiences' attentions for generation after generation. So in a sense, there is a ready-made audience. The trade-off is that it may be a smaller audience that is educated and literate, rather than the worldwide popular audience that does not read or does know the great works of literature. The other element that sometimes dampens enthusiasm for these stories is that they are set in the historical past. This does not always appeal to audiences who have an appetite for seeing contemporary life reflected in the movies.

Period movies involve costumes, locations, and props that considerably increase the cost of production. In 1995, Jonathon Swift's satirical work *Gulliver's Travels* was turned into a television miniseries. The producers took advantage of modern computer-generated special effects. However, they introduced a shell story not in the original, in which Gulliver has a son and a wife who want him back. When he returns and is condemned as a madman, the son saves him by finding some of the miniature animals from Lilliput in their luggage. It tampers with the author's intention and sentimentalizes the final satire that has Gulliver preferring the company of horses (Houyhnhms) to humans.

In the 1990s, producers discovered the works of Jane Austen and Henry James, two authors whose novels are not mass audience fare. Yet both authors have subtlety and texture that is surprisingly modern and cinematic. Hidden emotional forces in the lives of their characters can be portrayed in the visual language of cinema. Implied sexuality can be more readily understood in looks and gestures. Consider *The Wings of the Dove* (1997) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996). In other words, film makers can find contemporary values in old stories. Jane Austen's struggling and independent female characters can make contemporary interest in the changing role

of women all the more poignant because of the social strictures of early nineteenth-century England or the conventions of social behavior in Golden Age America. Films such as *Pride and Prejudice* (1940 and again in 2005), *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), and *Emma* (1996) have won Oscars and been remade several times since the invention of film and television.

## Length

Movies and television play in real time. A minute is a minute on screen. The movie narrative has a time limit. A paragraph or a page has no fixed time value. A novel can condense time and expand time. It can pack into descriptive prose numerous locations and casts of characters that would cripple a budget. Also, the novel can describe characters and express their thoughts. So the first problem of adaptation is to find a visual and action storyline. In general, source works are longer than the movie can be because prose narrative is, in certain ways, more efficient than narration in visual media, which depends on action. Short stories and novellas generally make a better transition to the screen. A case in point is the classic western *High Noon* (1952). The screenplay was written by Carl Foreman, adapted from a Collier's Magazine story "The Tin Star" (by John W. Cunningham), published in December 1947. The film is better than the original story.

## Point of View

Some readers might have tried their hand at prose fiction, either short story or novel. It is quickly apparent that the writer of fiction has options that the screen writer does not. The most important of these is the narrative point of view. Prose narrative must have a point of view. Although Melville's *Bartleby*, for example, is narrated in the first person from the point of view of a single character and the way he perceives events, the most common style of narration for the novel is usually referred to as the omniscient or third person narrator. The writer can see everything and know the thoughts of all the characters. The writer can write objective description that sets time, mood, and place without reference to a character's point of view. Or the writer can describe what a character sees and thinks as well as put lines of dialogue in the character's mouth. This flexibility is part of the richness of fiction as a form.

In some ways it is easier to write fiction because of the versatility of its narrative devices. Writing for the screen means, similar to the theater, confining the narrative to a certain duration. The story must be told within a time frame defined by the medium. We have all seen movies of a book we have read and felt the disappointment that the movie is not as good as the book. A movie can never be like the book because it is a different medium. Parts of the novel have to be left out. A novel can luxuriate in passages of description and describe the

thoughts of characters in omniscient third-person narrative. The plot usually has to be tightened up. Sometimes the setting has to be changed. And a novel that can be read in ten or twenty hours has to play in two hours.

The question of point of view is very important for movies because the camera must point one way or another for every shot. As an optical recording instrument, it necessarily creates a literal point of view. The viewer cannot see anything other than that which is included in the frame. In some ways, this makes the medium very powerful because it is concrete and because it creates emphasis. On the other hand, it also limits what the audience can see and experience by placing a specific image in the viewer's consciousness and excluding all others.

## Narrative Tense and Screen Time

After point of view, the second great variable is the narrative tense. A novel can weave in and out of present time, but a movie camera narrates in the present tense because what we see is necessarily present time.<sup>1</sup> So we have to think in terms of seeing and hearing characters do and say things in front of us. We cannot represent their thoughts in the same way that a novelist does. We can only show them by action and reaction in situations. We have to narrate by means of key moments. A novelist can write in the past tense, which is the most common, or can write in the present tense, or, to a degree, with care, even change tenses, depending on the point of view. This cannot happen in film unless you admit the flashback to be a tense change. Even in a flashback, the camera films in the present tense, as it were, and you experience the past now.

In some films, the manipulation of tenses of time relative to the main time of the story can become confusing. You don't know when you are in the past and when you are in the present. Some films create confusion when playing with chronological order. This is not the case with prose fiction. The signposts are usually unambiguous. This is probably because some of these time shifts in film are created by editing in post production. *Memento* (2000) comes to mind, even though the premise of the film posits a character with short term memory loss.

## Setting and Period

The first issue that comes up concerns setting. Do you do the piece in period? Or do you transpose the story to another time? Is the story attached to its time? These questions came very much to the fore in adapting *Bartleby*. The question I asked was whether an audience in the 1970s would respond to this story if it were set in a legal office in the New York of a century before. Could the timeless element of the story be transposed to the modern day and thereby reveal a meaning that many would not recognize in a setting of frock coats and quill pens? The passive

resistance, the portrait of a loner who would not cooperate with an employer or with social norms, seemed intensely relevant to a post-Vietnam world of political protest and a generation of youth, who did not buy into the social contract. The story seemed to be a commentary on the contemporary social phenomenon of the drop-out. There were hundreds of Bartlebys. In fact, many people have said to me that they have met or known a person just like Bartleby. So the character seems to be timeless.

There are tremendous risks to transposing the story. A lot of elements change. For instance, a modern law office does not use scribes to make copies of legal documents. Legal secretaries, and now word processing, take care of that chore. So what is a modern equivalent? From my observation of dealing with lawyers and accountants, the answer seemed to be that an accountant's office, where bookkeepers' work with figures and balance sheets demands meticulous drudgery, would be the modern-day equivalent.

Of course, with a contemporary setting, other details would have to change. However, setting it in London, England, in a kind of stuffy, retrograde British professional, gentlemanly environment seemed to be a perfect equivalent to the mannered stiffness of the New York lawyer of a hundred years earlier. Once you go in this direction, everything changes.

A comparison might be that of changing the setting of a Shakespeare play. It is frequently done in the theater and in movie adaptations. *West Side Story*, the famous musical by Leonard Bernstein, reworks Shakespeare's theme of "star-crossed lovers" in modern New York among Puerto Rican gangs. Think of the recent film of *Romeo and Juliet* (1996) in which gangs with .45 automatics in a Latin setting substitute for the houses of Montague and Capulet in Renaissance Verona. The emotional truth of the story is largely intact, but the text has to be severely edited for anachronisms. In many ways, that movie idea derives from Bernstein's musical crossed with *Miami Vice*. An English movie made in 1995 set *Richard III* in a ruthless fascist world that recalled Nazi Germany as a way of making the unprincipled villainy of Richard's political plotting more plausible. A new *Hamlet* came out in 2000 that set the play in contemporary New York. In it, Denmark is a corporation and the king a CEO.

## Dialogue Versus Action

In novels, there is often more dialogue than can be used in a film adaptation. The question is whether the character dialogue that works in the novel will also work in the film. As we know from earlier discussion, it usually doesn't work to talk the plot. Bartleby's classic line ("I prefer not to") can be supplemented with looks and gestures. However, the opposite is true for Frank Capra's classic movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*. The short story on which it is based is very thin on dialogue. The film script adds a great deal of dialogue that is not in the original story to very good effect, dialogue that makes the characters come alive and dialogue that gives

the audience information. For example, the angel in the original simply turns up and engages George in talk. In the movie, we get a shot of the sky with voice-over dialogue from some kind of heavenly administration that is assigning duties to angels until we get to Clarence, who hasn't yet got his wings. The movie opens with an original scene of people praying for George Bailey, which seems to activate the prayer answering department of heaven:

CAMERA PULLS UP from the Bailey Home and travels up through the sky until it is above the falling snow and moving slowly toward a firmament full of stars. As the camera stops, we hear the following heavenly voices talking, and as each voice is heard, one of the stars twinkles brightly.

FRANKLIN'S VOICE

Hello, Joseph, trouble?

JOSEPH'S VOICE

Looks like we'll have to send someone down.  
A lot of people are asking for help for a man  
named George Bailey.

FRANKLIN'S VOICE

George Bailey. Yes, tonight's his crucial night.  
You're right. We'll have to send someone down  
immediately.

Whose turn is it?

JOSEPH'S VOICE

That's why I came to see you, sir. It's that  
clock-maker's turn again.

FRANKLIN'S VOICE

Oh! Clarence. Hasn't got his wings yet, has he?  
We've passed him right along.

JOSEPH'S VOICE

Because, you know, er, he's got the I.Q. of a  
rabbit.

FRANKLIN'S VOICE

Yes, but he's got the faith of a child. Joseph,  
send for Clarence.

A small star flies in from left of screen and stops. It twinkles as Clarence speaks.

CLARENCE'S VOICE

You sent for me sir?

FRANKLIN'S VOICE

Yes, Clarence. A man down on earth needs our help.

CLARENCE'S VOICE

Splendid! Is he sick?

FRANKLIN'S VOICE

No, worse. He's discouraged. At exactly ten forty-five PM tonight, Earth time, that man will be thinking seriously of throwing away God's greatest gift.

CLARENCE'S VOICE

Oh dear, dear! His life! Then I've only got an hour to dress. What are they wearing now?

FRANKLIN'S VOICE

You will spend that hour getting acquainted with George Bailey.

(See the video clip on the DVD.)



At this point, we get back to the earthly level of the movie and we get the angel's flashback of the life of George Bailey as a young boy when he saves his brother's life. So apart from the comedy of George getting a second-class angel who gets us on his side, we have inserted into the original story a cinematic device that enables the movie to tell us the story of George's life free of chronological sequence and to introduce the characters of Bedford Falls. None of this is in the original story. It is the decisive device that makes the movie different from the short story and which makes the movie work.

## Descriptive Detail and the Camera Frame

In Chapter 2, we discussed the opening of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and how the descriptive prose of the novel, if literally turned into film images, would extend

the movie to unworkable length and impractical cost. The freedom of the novelist to describe detail presents the scriptwriter with a problem of choice—what to turn into a shot and what to ignore. What contributes to the story? What contributes to the atmosphere that is necessary to bringing that world alive?

Although novels frequently describe appearances or surroundings in detail, there is also a great deal that is left out. Everything that is in front of a camera lens has to be specific and concrete. Although some of these issues extend into production rather than script writing, the screenplay might need to specify things that the novel does not—props or decor that need to be imagined to create a screen image. The novel can afford to develop a character at length by describing the past and by representing the character's inner thoughts. A movie has to reveal the character in the present and through action or interaction with other characters.

## Implied Action

Novels also imply action that a film version might not want to use. For instance, when Melville's narrator tells us that he finally moved offices to get rid of Bartleby, he doesn't describe moving. A powerful image suggests itself of movers taking away the furniture and leaving Bartleby standing in a bare office. When the lawyer drops into his office one Sunday to discover that Bartleby is living in his office, what should we see on screen? A novelist can leave it to the reader's imagination. A scriptwriter cannot. To convey that Bartleby is living in the office, a few shots can show him washing in the bathroom or getting dressed. Melville describes how the lawyer discovers evidence that Bartleby is living in his office. In the novella, there is a paragraph. In the screenplay, three short scenes expand on the prose. We need to see the lawyer arriving, his suspicion, his surprise, and his reactions. It is an opportunity to reveal a discovery in purely visual terms without dialogue. This is what makes movies work. Interestingly, in this case the script expands on the novella, whereas novels have to be cut down in length. Short stories usually get expanded.

For instance, the adaptation of Melville's *Bartleby* presented a problem in that the novella is narrated in the first person from the point of view of the lawyer who employs Bartleby. He shares his thoughts with the reader. In a movie, you have the choice of rendering this as a voice over narration, or you have to create some kind of situation in which some of his thoughts are revealed by interaction. It therefore, seemed reasonable to create a lunch scene with a colleague in which he tries to rationalize his behavior towards Bartleby. The responses of the colleague spoken from convention and common sense set in relief the obsessional rationalizing state of this Wall Street lawyer. (Read the scene and see the scene in the DVD.) This approach entails risk. You alter the original. Elsewhere I criticize the TV script of *Gulliver's Travels* because it creates false shell story with a wife and a child.



These are extra characters. The difference is that they fundamentally alter the meaning of Jonathon Swift's satire.

## It's a Wonderful Life

*It's a Wonderful Life* is a well-written, well-made, and well-acted film. The story premise (see the DVD for the script) almost forms a genre—a movie story with recognizable or predictable elements. In this case, it is an angel movie. An angel or two intervene in the earthly drama of a human life with complex plot consequences about time, cause and effect, and free will. It becomes a device that allows us to look at causality in existence. Everyone is fascinated by the problem of free will. You don't have to be a philosopher or a theologian. You just have to wonder if your life is fate or your own doing. Everyone, from time to time, has a notion that some greater force controls life's events, not individual choice. Most people wonder what would have happened if they had married or not married someone, made a different choice of major, job, profession or chosen to live somewhere else. There is also envy—some people seem to be getting a better deal in life than others. So the premise of the film, despite the unrealistic, supernatural elements, finds fertile soil in the imagination of any audience in which the plot can grow.

The basic premise of *It's a Wonderful Life* is that an angel trying to earn his wings intervenes in the life of George Bailey to save him from committing suicide when his life hits a crisis. He fulfills George's wish that he had never been born. George then visits the alternate world that results from this to discover that his life has made a difference in the world. The moral is that each individual life counts and affects the lives of others. In other words, the universe is affected by our individual existence. Individual destiny is universal destiny. It is dramatically intriguing because it makes the audience into an omniscient observer. It's a film that has stood the test of time. Another reason is that a number of contemporary television series and movies derive from it, or make use of the same basic premise.

*Quantum Leap* (1989)<sup>2</sup> built a series on a science fiction premise, that a researcher time travels and finds himself in a different body each week. His only guide is a hologram angel or alter ego who furnishes him with critical, omniscient information about his time and situation. Our hero is desperately trying to get back to his own body and own time. You can see how the premise lends itself to a series.

*Groundhog Day* (1993) is another variation on this same plot. The main character is a television weatherman who by some fluke is able to replay and relive the same day over and over again. When he catches on that time is repeating like a scratched record (or a dirty CD, for those who don't remember vinyl records), he takes advantage of his prescience to experiment with alternate choices. In other words, he is able to stand outside of time and see the causality of events and make different choices to have different outcomes for himself and those around him.



*Touched by an Angel* (1994)<sup>3</sup> is a popular TV series that explores the premise of angels intervening to teach people in crisis, who are about to make bad or destructive decisions, how to act positively. Poor mortals get the benefit of angelic counsel in the midst of sin and suffering, proving that the universe is benevolent and good can triumph over evil. *Michael* (1996) is a feature film that looks at a National Enquirer story in which an angel with wings has come into the world of the owner of the Milk Bottle Motel somewhere in the Midwest. The team of reporters who go to investigate get their life problems untangled and small miracles are worked by the angel to bring lovers together and a dog back to life. The comedy of an angel behaving contrary to expectations is milked for all it's worth. Again the plot turns around free will and intervention in destiny.

The television series *Now and Again* (1999)<sup>4</sup> explores the fiction that a man who dies in an accident is brought back to life by a secret government agency in a genetically engineered body. His brain, memory, and self-identity remain intact. He is not allowed to make contact with his wife or daughter on pain of termination. He is a fat-slob insurance salesman reborn as a superman. The premise produces numerous comic episodes in which he encounters his wife and daughter but cannot reveal his identity.

The satirical movie *Dogma* (1999)<sup>5</sup> is based on the plot idea of an alternative destiny that depends on intervention in the lives or actions of characters by supernatural beings. In this case, God is trapped by the devil in a human body, and the whole reality of the universe is at risk unless the good angels somehow manage to avert the contradiction that God's will is not absolute because two fallen angels are trying to get back into heaven.

*Run Lola Run (Lola Rennt)* (1998)<sup>6</sup> is a film about three different versions of the same scenario that explore alternate outcomes when slight variations in action alter the coincidences and events that follow. We see Lola run to save her lover in three plot outcomes. This makes the audience into the omniscient observer.

All of these variants of the angel/intervention plot illustrate different ways you can construct a movie plot from the same basic premise in original ways. You may be able to add to the list. Nicolas Cage plays the central character in yet another destiny plot in which a rich capitalist bachelor gets switched into an alternative life in which he's married to an old girlfriend and has numerous children—*Family Man* (2000). This genre will continue to thrive on television and movies. Meanwhile, let us return to the granddaddy of them all and, in the process, learn some more about the challenge of screen adaptation.

The story *The Greatest Gift*, on which *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946)<sup>7</sup> is based, is shorter and simpler than the movie. George and the angel are the only two main characters. Even George's wife is a minor character. In the movie, we see George's life from the time he was a boy to his falling in love with Mary and meet a huge cast of supporting characters including his brother and various townspeople, not to mention the savings and loan customers. Of particular importance is his alcoholic uncle who precipitates the ultimate reversal that makes George contemplate suicide.

None of these are to be found in the original story. They were invented by the scriptwriters who needed to flesh out the detail of the essential plot idea and make it emotionally convincing in all the detail that brings Bedford Falls to life.

The story kicks off with voice-overs of people praying for a certain George Bailey. Who is George Bailey? This is, of course, a hook for the audience. We want to know who George Bailey is. Then we hear the voices (off-screen) of angels discussing the case and who will be assigned to it. When Clarence, angel second class, who still has not attained his wings, is summoned (this piece of droll invention has no basis in the original story), we are given a potted history of George Bailey by way of a briefing for the angel's mission. George Bailey is about to take his own life. This briefing takes the form of a flashback story (another device of the screenplay not in the original story) of George's life that takes us from his boyhood to early manhood. We are introduced to his father, the manager of the savings and loan association that finances the houses of low-income people in the small New York town of Bedford Falls. Mr. Potter, a kind of Scrooge character, dominates these townspeople's financial lives. George is all set to fulfill his boyhood dream of leaving Bedford Falls on a great trip abroad before going to college.

On the eve of his departure, we are introduced to Mary, the kid sister of his friend, at the high school dance where a relationship is seeded. Their night's romance is cut short by the heart attack of his father, Peter Bailey. Three months after his death, George, having postponed his trip to keep the savings and loan going, is present at the board meeting where Mr. Potter, the money-grubbing villain, moves to disband the savings and loan. George's passionate speech in defense of his father's work and of the importance of the institution for the ordinary people leads to the board's rejection of the motion and to their appointing George to replace his father. He insists he is going to leave town to go to college. In short, he stays and sends his kid brother to college with his savings with the plan that they will trade places in four years.

This is about the ending of Act I. We have met all the characters. George has made a choice to postpone his life. So it becomes a story about small town America and about a community.

In Act II, George's brother comes home from college married to a woman whose father has offered him a job in his company. The more George tries to break out of Bedford Falls, the more it seems to entangle him. He visits his old flame Mary, who is being wooed by a rival, pushed by the mother. The mutual attraction between George and Mary results in their marrying.

As they are about to leave on their honeymoon, there is a panic run on the banks and the savings and loan during the depression. Mr. Potter tries to buy the members' shares at a discount. George uses his savings to pay the depositors, who want all or some of their money, and manages to stave off the collapse of the bank, much to the disgust of Potter. After refusing an offer to work for Mr. Potter, George, always the man of principle, opts to defend the people and their savings institution.

Four children are born to him and Mary. World War II turns his younger brother into a fighter pilot and a war hero who wins the Congressional Medal of Honor. His uncle, who is a drinker and has an absentminded character, is taking the savings and loan association deposits to the bank when he runs into Mr. Potter. Showing him the headline about his war hero nephew, he accidentally gives his envelope of cash deposits to Mr. Potter when he hands him back his newspaper. Potter, who now owns the bank, discovers the envelope and is about to return it when he sees his chance to realize a lifelong ambition to destroy or take over the savings and loan. The uncle now frantically retraces his steps looking for the money. At the savings and loan, George learns of the predicament on Christmas Eve. Meanwhile, a bank auditor has to go over the books. Evil is about to triumph over our Everyman hero who faces impossible odds. This is the end of Act II.

Now George must go to Potter and beg for a loan at any price, offering his life insurance as a surety, to cover the missing money. Potter not only refuses but acts to have him arrested for embezzlement and fraud. When George returns home, in despair of finding a solution, his erratic, impatient, and uncharacteristic behavior with his children alerts his wife Mary. After venting his frustration on his family, he goes out to the local bar to drown his sorrows. The children and his wife start to pray.

We have now completed the flashback. Snow is falling. George, now drunk, smashes up his car as he drives to the bridge. When George gets to the bridge over the falls and prepares to kill himself so that his life insurance will redeem the provident society, the angel, Clarence, finally intervenes to stop him. Instead Clarence jumps off himself and appeals to George's better instinct to save someone else. As they dry off in the toll house, Clarence reveals his identity. When George expresses the wish that he had never been born, Clarence seizes upon it as the way to teach him. He grants his wish.

George goes back into town to find an alternate world in which he does not exist. All the people whom he knows, including his wife, have lived other destinies much worse for the absence of George Bailey who has affected so many. This reversal seems disastrous until George asks Clarence to give him his life back. At this point he returns with joy to his wife and children. The many people whose lives he has affected now turn up with baskets full of money as the word has spread. The crisis has been averted and George reconciled to his wonderful life as the people, affected by his life, sing a Christmas hymn and then "Auld Lang Syne."

Most of the movie is about George's growing up and falling in love and his defense of the townspeople from the rapacious banker and landlord, Potter, through the savings and loan created by his father. George never gets to go away and fulfill his youthful dreams. One circumstance after another conspires to keep him in small town America, hopping from decision to decision, which seems the right choice at the time. It leads to the ordinary life of a good man whose heroism is modest and

whose deeds consist of doing the right thing. It is a paean to the life of the average American man, who is of course sitting in the audience.

Now let us go back to the source work—*The Greatest Gift*.<sup>8</sup> The original source turns out to be a short story of great simplicity that turns on the essential plot idea of a man called George in a nameless town who is standing on a bridge on Christmas Eve feeling suicidal. A nameless stranger appears to save him by granting his wish that he had never been born. Skeptical, he then returns to town to find out that his hometown is physically different and that the people in his life have lived different destinies because he, George, had never been born. After seeing this alternate reality (which poses a few problems in quantum mechanics and entropy), George rushes back to the bridge to find the stranger and get his wish undone. Rushing back into town he is overjoyed to discover his old life restored. It is a basic, simple moral fable about the value of the life of each individual. The big difference between the story and the movie is that the story provides very little motivation, at least very general motivation, that would not intrigue the audience, when an angel intervenes:

I'm stuck here in this mudhole for life, doing the same dull work day after day. Other men are leading exciting lives, but I—well, I'm just a small-town bank clerk that even the Army didn't want. I never did anything really useful or interesting, and it looks as if I never will. I might just as well be dead. I might better be dead. Sometimes, I wish I were. In fact, I wish I'd never been born!

Taken by itself, this is just a bunch of petulant whining. The film script based on this short story of a dozen pages has invented and elaborated on huge amounts of detail and fleshed out the main character. The screenplay adds characters and alters the sequence of the story to construct the film as a long flashback.<sup>9</sup> This is why we believe in George's suicidal urge. When we get to the bridge scene, we have seen George's whole life and know him and identify with him and agonize over his final humiliation and final setback of losing the savings and loan deposit, playing into the hands of his lifelong adversary, the villainous Mr. Potter, who sees the opportunity to destroy George and take over the savings and loan. (See the scene at the bridge on the DVD.)

Are we worrying about what's going to happen? You bet! For the entire movie, George has thrown off every setback and disappointment. This ultimate reversal sets up the denouement. Remember, the woodcutter, a minor character in the second act of *Little Red Riding Hood*? One of his friends, George Wainright, now wealthy, who offered him a chance to get rich in his youth, hears of the problem and wires funds. All the townspeople contribute their dollars and cents. The denouement is not just a happy ending, it ties up all the loose ends of the plot which explain and motivate the actions of all the characters. In this case, the movie is far superior to the source work.



## *Bartleby*

The opposite is, in a way, true about *Bartleby* because it derives from a small masterpiece of American literature. The film becomes a commentary and a reinterpretation of it. Melville's story is short enough to read as an assignment. It also presents a number of challenging problems of adaptation.



In 1853, Herman Melville published a novella called *Bartleby, The Scrivener (a story of Wall Street)* in Putnam's *Monthly Magazine*.<sup>10</sup> The story is written in the first person. A lawyer, who remains nameless, hires a new scribe (or "scrivener") to work in his law office. He describes his law chambers and his employees and recounts the extraordinary relationship with the mysterious and impenetrable character called Bartleby. Bartleby, little by little, refuses to carry out the tasks that are asked of him. The lawyer does not know how to deal with this unpredictable character, his passive resistance to the work contract, and, finally, his refusal to obey instructions. Bartleby gets under his skin. He does not want to get angry. It becomes a psychological battle of wits.

In the end, Bartleby becomes a liability to the business. When Bartleby is fired, he won't leave the building. Eventually, the lawyer moves his office leaving Bartleby behind. Then the next tenant comes to his new office to complain about the ghostly presence of Bartleby, who sleeps in the building. Finally, Bartleby is arrested and thrown into prison where the employer feels compelled to visit him and where Bartleby finally dies. The lawyer has gradually assumed a kind of responsibility and even a kind of guilt, early on, for the circumstance of this solitary and obstinate character. One Sunday, he visits his Wall Street office to find evidence that Bartleby is sleeping, eating, and living in his office:

For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me. Before, I had never experienced aught but a not unpleasing sadness. The bond of a common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam.<sup>11</sup>



In the shooting script of the film, the scene is without dialogue. (See the DVD.)

EXT. STREET -- DAY

During the weekend, the Accountant drives over to his office. His car pulls up at the curb. He gets out and walks into the building. He is dressed casually.

CUT TO

INT. CORRIDOR OUTSIDE OFFICE -- DAY

The Accountant approaches down the corridor and opens the door to his office and goes in.

CUT TO

INT. OFFICE -- DAY

The Accountant stops noticing something unusual as he passes through reception. He sees a blanket on the sofa and then looks into Bartleby's cubicle where he sees a piece of soap, a razor, and a towel on the desk.

CUT TO

INT BARTLEBY'S CUBICLE -- DAY

He walks into Bartleby's cubicle half expecting to find Bartleby there. Then he becomes curious about further clues. On Bartleby's desk are the remains of some food, a cup, and a knife. The Accountant is agitated and scandalized by this unheard of arrangement but also moved and depressed by the implied solitude and poverty of Bartleby's existence. He goes to Bartleby's desk and looks through to discover more personal belongings: a change of underwear, money saved and wrapped in a hand kerchief. He puts everything back.

CUT TO

INT. OFFICE -- DAY

When the Accountant has finished, he stands up and turns to confront Bartleby who is standing behind him at the door looking mildly reproachful. Without a word he turns and exits. The Accountant follows him. FADE IN MUSIC.

The lawyer rather likes Bartleby: “. . . there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but in a wonderful manner, touched and disconcerted me.” Later, he comments, “Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance.” Then he rationalizes, “He is useful to me. I can get along with him.”<sup>12</sup> When Bartleby continues to greet every request with the line “I prefer not to,” the lawyer gets frustrated because he thought he could handle Bartleby. He suppresses his anger. This reflective narrative is difficult to turn into film. The solution for this writer was to invent a scene in which the lawyer, now an accountant, has lunch with a colleague. Psychologically, it works to have him try to rationalize his Bartleby problem and to hear an outsider with a commonsense point of view reveal to us how obsessed and isolated the character is becoming.

INT. RESTAURANT — DAY

THE ACCOUNTANT and a COLLEAGUE are sitting at a table eating lunch. THE ACCOUNTANT is talking about BARTLEBY with animation, trying to justify himself to his COLLEAGUE. The COLLEAGUE is mainly interested in his lunch. For him it is a simple matter—fire Bartleby. We hear the general background of a restaurant.

COLLEAGUE

Why don't you just sack him? Could I have the salt, please?

ACCOUNTANT

Sack him? I know it seems the obvious solution, but I can't quite bring myself to. He's so utterly civil, so dignified . . .

(THE COLLEAGUE shrugs and goes on eating)

He's actually a very efficient worker except that he refuses to do certain things from time to time. It's sort of... passive resistance.

COLLEAGUE

Oh yes, what's he against?

ACCOUNTANT

Nothing, nothing! It's a mood; it's his manner. If I humour him a bit, I feel he'll come round. He could be a first class clerk. He needs someone to take him in hand. In another firm, he wouldn't have a chance.

The COLLEAGUE looks up and smiles sourly.

COLLEAGUE

No, he'd be sacked immediately.

FULL SHOT

The meal progresses. A waiter's hands are seen to clear the table of plates and utensils. The ACCOUNTANT is half thinking

to himself, half talking to his companion as he becomes caught up with reflections about BARTLEBY'S rebellion against him.

## ACCOUNTANT

Funny, I always end up giving him a chance even though he irritates me. I'm damned if I'm going to let him get away with it. But then I just wonder how far he'll go. I wonder how far he would go.

## COLLEAGUE

You ought to listen to yourself. You're obsessed with this character. Do yourself a favour. Get rid of him. People in the profession are beginning to talk about it. Your Bartleby will queer your reputation and put off clients.

(THE ACCOUNTANT begins to perceive that his judgment is confused. His prudence and his business sense are stirred)

## ACCOUNTANT

Really? Well there's a limit. But you know he's there first thing in the morning and last thing at night. In his way, he works hard. I'll bring him round yet. If not he'll have to go.

The scenes extract the essential conflict the lawyer narrates at length, but which has no filmable content. This is the kind of leap of imagination that a scriptwriter must have to adapt a work of literature. At the same time, it violates the sanctity of a literary classic. This is the dilemma. The adapter has to both add and subtract from the original, or find the equivalent. In the jail scene in the book, there is another character called the Grub Man. The film changes the prison to a mental hospital and the Grub Man to an anorexic inmate who is able to speak most of the lines in the original. You will have to judge by reading the forty-seven page novella, reading the script, and seeing the film. Others have wrestled with the problem and made changes to the characters when adapting the story for the screen in other productions.<sup>13</sup>

Some adapters take a novelist's narration and read it as a voice-over to accommodate the thoughts and comments expressed. This seems to be a cop-out most



of the time to writing a film equivalent. Two films, however, come to mind in which this technique works. The first is a remake of Nabokov's *Lolita* (1997) with Jeremy Irons. The second is a superb adaptation of the autobiographical novel of Marguerite Duras, the French novelist. The voice-over narration for *The Lovers* (1991) is delivered by the throaty, world weary voice of Jeanne Moreau. The other tactic of the film maker is to make the camera narrate visually and to frame close-up detail that reveals the emotional intention of the narration. When the two lovers meet, we see their shoes. He is an elegant dandy. She is a teenager, learning to walk in heels, unsure of herself, but wanting to explore her emerging womanly allure. There is a wonderful moment as they board the river ferry and we see their mutual looks, the detail of their clothes and gestures. Their attraction now leads on to a tragic love affair.

A lot of Melville's characters are outsiders and social misfits. As a writer he explored the intersection of normal and abnormal behavior and the experiences of people at the edge of conventional society but engaged in real-world activities. He shows us how a slight shift in circumstance, character, or point of view alters everything. *Moby Dick* and *Billy Budd*, *Foretopman* have attracted film makers.<sup>14</sup> Adapting a literary masterpiece is a dangerous undertaking. The source work has a huge audience and lives as an independent work. *The Greatest Gift*, however, was bought as a story without even being published until after the film had established itself as a classic.

*Bartleby* fascinated me because it was a psychological story and because, before its time, it seemed to explore the anonymity of modern urban life. It seemed to document a forgotten population whose lives are dominated by economic and social conditions that marginalize them. I had met people of my generation who had dropped out. They lived in the same environment I did, but they had no Social Security number, no health insurance, and squatted in abandoned houses. Some of them were just disoriented, but others were politically articulate and consciously rejected the social economic roles that are forced on us. *Bartleby* seemed to speak to the post-Vietnam world. It probably still does. The idea was to reveal the character in our own day. As soon as you decide to change period and setting, multiple problems arise.

One of the reasons why the story has cinematic potential is that it leaves a lot to the imagination. It also has a narrative point of view. Could you adopt that first person point of view for the film? Possibly! One could imagine a film that explores the lawyer's perception of the character. It would make a very claustrophobic visual narrative. It seemed to me that if you were going to do it, you should explore both characters with the camera and invent scenes that visually define the psychological space in which the character moves.

So I wanted to reveal Bartleby as a loner in a crowd, in the world but somehow not of it. The urban landscape behind him of impersonal buildings and concrete spaces helped to make his character plausible without necessarily getting behind his impenetrable mask. His words are very few. We see him as the anonymous

commuter in the tube train. He rises on the escalator like a damned soul coming back from the underworld to redeem himself and to allow others to redeem themselves. When he sees the massed starlings in the square on one of his walks, we see that these birds live in spite of the urban landscape just like he does. The sights that he sees and the camera records for us legitimize his character. Instead of having him put in prison, implausible in our own day, he gets committed to a mental institution. The through line of the character is the same, but the universe through which he travels changes color and texture compared to the original.

All literary classics have a rightful place in our cultural imagination. Adapting them for the screen risks alienating those who know and love the original. Then the audience that sees the film without knowing the original might get an experience of a great story but may not ever know the truth of the original. It is an interesting phenomenon that movies sell books, even literature, just as they sell the music of the film. Most entertainment conglomerates have a book publisher somewhere in their empire. When the movie is an original screenplay, media companies often commission a novel of the movie to garner the sales in their publishing market. When the source is a classic in the public domain, they also reissue the classic and sell the source story on the back of the movie release. One powerful reason to adapt a literary classic has to do with copyright. Many great works that have great cinematic potential, such as the works of Melville, Jane Austen, and Henry James, are in the public domain. That means no one owns the copyright. Any book or story that is copyrighted remains in copyright for the author's lifetime plus 70 years.

Henry James wrote a brilliant novella, a story of manners called *Daisy Miller*. It tells the story of a nouveau riche American family on the grand tour of Europe. The beautiful and wealthy young Daisy, her mother, and her small brother have no idea of manners and society. They are seen through the eyes of Winterbourne, a cultivated American, who is attracted to Daisy but too cowardly to declare his love because of his social snobbery about this wealthy but gauche American family. When the family arrives in Rome, Daisy scandalizes the ex-patriot American community by socializing with an Italian who is married. The story is full of comic situations and colorful visual locations. It would make an excellent exercise for adaptation even though it was made into a film by Peter Bogdanovich in 1974.

## Conclusion

Adaptation involves the translation of narrative from one medium (novel, play, or true story) into another, the motion picture. Writing a screenplay that adapts a source work usually involves compromises to make the story work in the new medium. The most basic problem is length. Films usually have to shorten the story and dispense with descriptive and reflective prose. Film narration depends on visual action in key scenes and sparse dialogue. A film must work on its own terms that can alter the proportions of the original. Some films, such as *It's a Wonderful Life*

and *High Noon* improve on the original story. The chances are that lesser known, short works make better films than long complex novels.

## Exercises

1. Take a children's story like *Little Red Riding Hood* or *The Three Little Pigs* and write a movie adaptation in the form of a scene outline. Change the names and the settings if need be.
2. Find a short story out of an anthology, a Freshman English text for example, and adapt it for the screen.
3. Write an analysis of a movie adapted from a book you know or have read and evaluate whether it works or doesn't work and figure out why.
4. Take a standard fairy tale or folk tale such as Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Beauty and the Beast and turn it into a film story with your own characters in a modern setting.
5. Read Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and write your own screenplay of the Dracula story. Compare the original with some of the screen adaptations of this story.
6. Read "The Greatest Gift" and compare it with the screenplay and the film of *It's a Wonderful Life*.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>See Kenneth Portnoy, *Screen Adaptation: A Scriptwriting Handbook* (Boston: Focal Press, 1998), p. 7: "In the novel, there are three time periods—past, present, and future. The screenwriter must deal in the present and devise ways to reveal the past. . . ."

<sup>2</sup>See <http://uk.imdb.com/Title?0098151> for production details and plot summary.

<sup>3</sup>See <http://uk.imdb.com/Title?0108968>.

<sup>4</sup>See <http://uk.imdb.com/Title?0212395>.

<sup>5</sup>See <http://uk.imdb.com/Title?0120655>.

<sup>6</sup>See <http://uk.imdb.com/Title?013082>.

<sup>7</sup>Directed by Frank Capra and written by Philip Van Doren Stern and Frances Goodrich, based on the novella "The Greatest Gift" ([http://www.failuremag.com/arch\\_arts\\_its\\_a\\_wonderful\\_life.html](http://www.failuremag.com/arch_arts_its_a_wonderful_life.html)), and starring James Stewart, Donna Reed, and Lionel Barrymore. See [http://sfy.ru/sfy.html?script=its\\_a\\_wonderful\\_life](http://sfy.ru/sfy.html?script=its_a_wonderful_life).

<sup>8</sup>Originally published privately by Philip Van Doren Stern in 1943. See *Afterword* by Marguerite Stern Robinson in the new Penguin Studio edition (New York, 1996).

<sup>9</sup>Note that no fewer than five scriptwriters contributed in varying degrees to this screenplay. See <http://uk.imdb.com/Title?0038650>.

<sup>10</sup>See a scan of the original publication on the DVD.

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<sup>11</sup>Herman Melville, "Bartleby: The Scrivener," in *Selected Writings of Herman Melville*, The Modern Library (New York: Random House, 1952), p. 23.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, pp. 16–17.

<sup>13</sup>See the account by George Bluestone, *Bartleby: The Tale, the Film, in Bartleby, The Scrivener: The Melville Annual*, Howard P. Vincent (ed.) (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1966), pp. 45–54.

<sup>14</sup>John Huston made *Moby Dick* (1956) and Peter Ustinov made *Billy Budd* (1962). See <http://www.imdb.com> for credits.

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## Television Series, Sitcoms, and Soaps

# 12

Television is a huge maw that devours programming. Think of the number of channels! Think of the need for new ideas! Think of the need for writers to write episodes of long-running series that reappear season after season! Although the total program lineup for the medium includes news, documentary, sports, games shows, and so on, we are going to discuss only the program content that is acted entertainment, such as series, sitcoms, and soaps.<sup>1</sup> We need to understand the special requirements of television writing and learn the basic techniques of thinking and writing for television. Then we need to look at comedy and some techniques for writing comedy. Because television is changing all the time, we need to think about what's new. Then there is the question of script format—how you lay out the page. Last, we need to recognize that there is a rich bibliography of works devoted exclusively to writing for television that will take you deeper than we can ever go in one chapter. Your job right now is to get up and running with your first effort at writing for this medium.

In the first half-century of motion pictures, serial programming had evolved as a way of appealing to audiences. A weekly news report from Movietone News or Pathé was part of the program, as was a cartoon. People would go to the movies on a weekly basis. Kids would go to Saturday matinees. Each week brought a new episode of Charlie Chaplin, or Abbot and Costello, or the Lone Ranger, or Hopalong Cassidy. The idea of producing a new weekly segment of a continuing program formula was part of the movie distribution model. So the television formula was, in a way, anticipated by the movies. The television medium just makes it much easier to distribute program content and much easier for the audience to access that content on a regular basis.

The other source of television genres was its broadcast antecedent, radio. Radio had coped with the problem of devising formats to fill the day's schedule: news, variety, comedy, drama, sports, game shows, and children's programming. Radio serials

such as *Superman* have been reborn as television serials. Comedy that had to be verbal could now be visual. Tuning in to the radio on a daily or a weekly basis transferred to television just as easily. Television was a convergence of radio and film in both technology (radio pictures) and programming. The idea of watching a program in serial segments was familiar to TV viewers because of their experience with radio and, to some extent, with movies and therefore was a natural fit for television, which developed it and refined it into the series for the new medium. The movie short and documentary, once a regular part of movie programming, vanished or migrated to factual programming on television. The emergence of television had a marked effect on the way movie programs were composed and marketed. It also altered the kind of movies that got made. To compete, movies were made so as to offer a unique experience in screen size and production scale and, of course, in those days, color when television was black and white.

## The Premise for Series, Sitcoms, and Soaps

Nowadays, the premise for a television series is slightly different than the premise for a movie. The television premise has to keep generating new episodes and new scripts each week, whereas a movie is conceived as a single story even though producers exploit some box office successes by making sequels and prequels. Take a stalwart like *ER*. An emergency room is at once a setting and a premise because it provides an endless stream of incidents and episodes. You have the constant throughput of patients during each episode with a drama that can reach out into a wider social world. You have the ongoing professional and personal relationships between interns, physicians, nurses, and technicians, interspersed with drive-by patients with interesting and quirky stories.

Think of *L.A. Law*—a law firm with a cast of characters ranging from partners to law secretaries. Each case is a new drama that provides a plot for a week or even two or three weeks. Each case introduces new characters. Some episodes present more than one case, each with a different lawyer or partner as the focus. Each episode can explore a new legal and social issue or an anomaly of human behavior. It's a natural. The series also gives its audience insight into the workings of the law business—the commercial pressures, the competition, and the internal politics of the firm. A reworking of this series premise is *The Practice*, in which the district attorney and a defense lawyer are roommates, and two of the defense attorneys have a love relationship. So we see more intense exploration of the working of the courts, and we see another city background, Boston. Now we have a new series, *Boston Law*. *Family Practice* is yet another way to vary this premise. Endless stories about social issues, child care issues, and marital issues that intersect with the law can be spun out of this premise.

In all of these series, the courtroom creates dramas of confrontation because of its adversary system of prosecution and defense together with a citizen jury (really

representing the audience), whose decisions will always provide a moment of climax and suspense. Cross this with the military and you get *J.A.G.*, which stands for Judge Advocate General (for the U.S. Navy). Now you have a way to spin stories about moral conflict between human nature and military discipline, not to mention social issues to do with race, gender, and cultural diversity. You also have superb opportunities to open up interiors to the occasional exterior of military theaters of action involving ships, aircraft carriers, and foreign locations. Can you do the next one? How about *Patent Law*? We see how new inventions, scientific discovery, and corporate skulduggery intersect. The little guys fight the big guys. We learn about new economy start-ups, business law, IPOs, biotechnology, information technology, and e-commerce.

The hospital series, such as *ER*, or the police series, such as *NYPD Blue*, or the detective series, such as *Columbo*, are all virtually inexhaustible formulas for television series that are as old as television itself. The oldest series programming, soaps, derives from radio drama series sponsored by the soap and detergent manufacturers that wanted to reach the daytime audience of housewives who would buy their products. The tradition continued into television. Long-running chronicles of passion, ambition, jealousy, and revenge, such as *The Young and the Restless* or *The Bold and the Beautiful*, have loyal followings. The way they are written and produced follows a pattern that we need to understand to avoid writing clichés. Then there are the single-name shows like *Frasier*, *Harvey*, and *Seinfeld*, which are built around a star character and his or her particular brand of comedy.

We need to recognize that there are two types of series. The first has a constant style and cast of characters, but each new episode tells a new and independent story. The plot of one program has no connection with the plot of another. Each week, we see another variation on the kind of theme that makes the series work. That is true for *Touched by an Angel*, *Nash Bridges*, *Walker, Texas Ranger*, *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, and many other series.

The other model is a serial, more typical of the soaps in which the story continues from one episode to another. If you do not watch *The Young and the Restless* on a regular basis, you may not grasp the full significance of some story lines or relationships. You do not know the back story of the characters. This is true for an old series like *Star Trek* and newer series such as *Once and Again*, *The Sopranos*, and *Sex and the City*. The continuing series allows lengthier and more complex storylines that become almost epic in their proportions. This model leads to different writing problems. In the one-off episode, the storyline is brief, the formula for resolution known, and the audience given completion at one viewing. The continuing series leaves the story incomplete at the end of the episode and needs an audience who is willing to come back again and again. It is an interesting form because unlike the one-off episode and unlike a movie, the eventual evolution of the story is not known at the outset by the writers and producers. Although both models are typical of television, the longer, multiple-episode story is rather unique to the medium. It allows a canvas that is more akin to the novel—full of texture and detail that

would not be possible even in a feature film—although sometimes the writing is so simplistic that the opportunity is lost. Producers and writers have to deal with killing off or retiring characters and introducing new ones because actors do not renew their contracts or because the story needs new life.

## Three-Act Structure and the TV Time Slot

After appreciating the dramatic structure of long-form movies, you might wonder how that structure works for the television half-hour and hour episodes, which are interrupted by commercial breaks. In the series model in which each episode is a self-contained unit with the same main characters (examples include *Highlander*, *Buffy*, *The Vampire Slayer*, and *Touched by an Angel*), a problem is introduced, usually a challenge to the main character. This sets up an antagonist who delivers a number of reversals that rise in severity until some kind of denouement occurs in which the hero triumphs and order and equilibrium are restored. Because the episodes are reborn each week, a recognizable structure is helpful to the audience. The basic formula of the three-act structure still works.

However, the serial structure, multiple storylines that extend beyond a single episode, works better for some soaps, sitcoms, and series that have complex stories. The soaps offer the clearest example. Each episode involves several story strands running simultaneously. None of the stories follows a strict three-act development structure but rather alternate as foils for one another. Just as one story line reaches a crisis, we end with a close-up on the character doing “the look.” An actor or actress holds a blank ambiguous look that conveys worry, thought, or some intense interior emotion, after having learned that their wife or husband has been unfaithful, that they have been disinherited, or that they are not the father of their child. Then, we cut to another parallel story strand involving another set of characters that develops to its temporary climax, and then we cut to a third or cut back to the second. Intercutting storylines is not a sophisticated editing technique nor a clever writing technique. It is simply a crude way to keep several storylines in play at once and to disguise the lack of dramatic structure.

Whenever you run out of ideas or get into trouble, cut to a commercial or another storyline. It is probably a way of keeping several audiences happy at once. This episodic structure has no real beginning and no real end. It is just a way of spinning out episodes for the cast of established characters. The series of indeterminate length, written as original work for television, illustrates both the most interesting and most bathetic potential of the medium.

There is also the formula of the miniseries. This entails two, three, or more episodes that might be scheduled on consecutive nights or spaced out over weeks. *Roots* (1977) was one of the most successful of these extended miniseries. A dramatized adaptation of Alex Haley’s documentary investigation of his African roots and family history through slavery to the present day, it was a complex and epic

story about African-American history that worked far better on television than it would have as a movie. It was also very successful in terms of audience share, achieving one of the largest TV audiences ever. One of the best miniseries, and certainly one of the greatest works of the western genre, was *Lonesome Dove* (1989), which was adapted from the western novel of Larry McMurtry. Both the writing and the acting, particularly by Robert Duvall and Tommy Lee Jones, were outstanding.

The television miniseries is a long-form narrative that has a predetermined end as opposed to an open-ended, long-running series. It is an effective way to adapt major novels and classic works such as the novels of Charles Dickens. The great allegorical and satirical work by Jonathan Swift *Gulliver's Travels* (1995) was adapted as a miniseries with a great deal of fiddling with the integrity of the original work. *The Thorn Birds* (1983) was one of the most successful serial stories on this model, followed by the sequel, *Thorn Birds: The Missing Years* (1996). The canvas for these two series was huge, covering 60 years in the lives of the Cleary family in Australia. A great miniseries that really took advantage of the scope of this long form of television program was *Shogun* (1980), adapted from the long novel by James Clavell and starring Richard Chamberlain. While keeping in mind the variety and scope of television writing, it is clear that the place to start is with the half-hour and hour episode because it allows writing to a basic three-act structure.

## Using Commercial Breaks

Because most television programming is broken up by commercials, the writer has to take them into account and write scenes or acts with an awareness of the moment to break so that the audience's interest is held, if not heightened, by the break. Apart from the fact that we use breaks to go to the bathroom, or get a snack or a drink, or make a phone call, we also sometimes switch to other channels. It makes you think that the modern audience is capable of running multiple storylines in its head and taking in emotional and factual information at several levels. Sometimes, the television screen performs the function of a social, informational, head-up display that modern urban man consults almost like a pilot reads multiple inputs of information from the flight deck instrumentation. The modern audience interacts with the medium through the remote control, surfing multiple channels and sampling multiple programs, watching more than one program simultaneously, whether by switching at commercial breaks or watching picture-in-picture. To some extent, television writing has developed so as to work in short episodic bursts so that its comedy, dialogue, and characters are instantly recognizable, enabling the audience to pick up the program at random and figure out what's happening. The audience watches behaviors, styles, and mannerisms that it learns to model in speech and emotions. The social impact of television makes it difficult to know sometimes whether life is imitating art or art is imitating life.

## Visualizing for the Small Screen

Sometimes, writers need to think carefully about the difference in screen size between movie and television screens. This difference can affect the way you write and the way you think about writing. Size of image counts. A large projected image has great impact and allows a different kind of cinematography and camera work. You may say, *But movies are shown on television all the time and movies are rented on video.* This is true. Nevertheless, the experience is not the same. When I fly transatlantic, I watch movies on a little LCD screen on the back of the seat in front of me. This does not give me the same experience I get in a movie theatre. The value of the images changes. Panoramic shots or big actions shots are less exciting. A lot of detail gets lost. The same is true for television. Also the shape of the screen changes from wide screen 2:85 to 1 ratio to a 4:3 television ratio. Parts of the picture are cut off. Now some of this will change when high-definition television becomes common and the aspect ratio of the screen changes to 16:9, which will fit Panavision wide-screen ratios for the most part. The resolution and the definition (crispness of detail) of the image together with the color reproduction will improve. Nevertheless, it will still be a different experience than watching a movie at a large-screen movie theatre, sitting in the dark with an audience of strangers.

Television is a close-up medium. News anchors, interviewers, and their subjects come across better in medium shot or close-up. So this is how camera operators and directors tend to compose the shot for so much television material. They are thinking about what it will look like when the audience experiences the program. That is what counts. Think about the content of television sitcoms and soaps! Most of the scenes play in medium shots or two shots. They deliver intimacy so that you can see the subtle emotional body language of the face of the character. This is what soaps are all about—showing feelings, looks, and concealing the same—up close and personal as the saying goes. The audience wants this intimate contact with the character. You have to think and write in terms of the screen size of the image and how it will communicate with the audience.

## TV Dialogue

The characteristics of the screen image have an impact on dialogue. If you want the audience to feel the characters, you have to put them in proximity to one another so that they talk and relate. It is a talking medium as well as a close-up medium. You will notice that television writing tends to make characters talk more than in movies. Dialogue carries more of the weight of a television storyline. The dialogue may refer to action or events, but we experience characters through their interchange. *The West Wing* is a good example of drama and complex relationships carried in tightly scripted dialogue.

Television is more likely to be produced in studio sets, whereas movies tend to exploit action, locations, special effects, and stunts. Television shows are shot on smaller budgets and tighter schedules than movies. The soaps always come to mind as the primary example. Most scenes consist of two people meeting in an office, an apartment, or a restaurant or talking over the phone to play out some relationship drama in verbal exchange. The primary technique, which is also the most economical way to shoot, is two-shot and matching singles, or a two-shot and over-the-shoulder reverses. The content of the shots is talk and emotional body language. So the writer writes the storyline and the dialogue to carry it.

## Realism/Realistic Dialogue

When characters open their mouths, we always expect their language to correspond to their world and their personality. In cop shows, medical shows, and legal shows, characters have to speak like those professionals do. They have to use the professional jargon. This is a writing responsibility. Think of another kind of dialogue writing problem in a series such as *Star Trek*. Apart from the fact that the Klingons have their own language (can you write Klingon?), the setting is not just fictional but hypothetical. All sorts of vocabulary is invented to refer to futuristic technology. It is easy to parody. We see serious-looking people in colored lycra body suits leaning over winking panels of controls and turning to say things like, “The particle shield is down. There’s no response.”, “Activate the thrust inhibitors!”, or, “Fire the gravity phaser!” or some such nonsense. Gadgetry is part of the plot and part of the series bible. You have to know what certain weapons are or what certain terms mean, such as the holodeck, where holograms can simulate alternative realities in other time periods. Science fiction establishes conventions of credibility. The idea of accelerating to warp speed or beaming someone down to a planet surface become accepted as concepts, which, in the case of *Star Trek*, have entered the general culture. So although it is invented language, it has its own realism in context.

In *The West Wing*, you expect senior staffers, whose world revolves around political and governmental issues, to use language that most people read in the papers; likewise for the journalists, advisors, and lawyers who live in the White House basement. At the same time if you study the script of a *West Wing* episode, you will not find realism but something that is realistic, a distinction we made in a previous chapter. Real staffers probably spend hours working on keyboards, reading memos and briefs without talking. When they do talk, they are probably more long-winded than their fictional counterparts in *The West Wing*. Their dialogue is taught, witty and full of repartee. Just as real doctors and nurses probably don’t behave like the fictional ones we see on *ER*, White House staffers probably do not trade witticisms in tight dialogue exchanges. As we have said before, simulating reality means making it believable, not necessarily realistic.

Realism is too long winded, too messy, too complicated. So we can get an exchange that is good television. The high drama that erupts in every episode probably doesn't occur with the same frequency in the life of real staffers. The point is the events and the dialogue are believable. People are people as well as staffers.

INT. WEST WING/MAIN LOBBY/CORRIDOR/BULLPEN JOSH'S OFFICE -

SAME TIME

CONTINUED

JOSH knows what this means and stops walking, holding onto DONNA's arm to get her to stop walking as well. They speak in hushed tones.

JOSH

What did I do?

DONNA

How would I know?

JOSH

Because you know everything.

DONNA

I do know everything.

JOSH

Donna . . .

DONNA

I'm saying you say that now, but anytime I want to make a substantive contribution . . .

JOSH

You make plenty of substantive contributions.

DONNA

Like what?

JOSH

This. This could be a substantive contribution.

DONNA  
I need a raise.

JOSH  
So do I.

DONNA  
You're my boss.

JOSH  
I'm not the one who pays you.

DONNA  
Yes, but you could recommend that I got a raise.

JOSH  
Donna, she's looking for me. Do you think this is a really good time to talk about a raise?

DONNA  
Mmm. I think it's the best time to talk about a raise.

JOSH  
Donna, you're not a very nice person.

DONNA  
You gotta get to know me.<sup>2</sup>

## Breaking Up Dialogue

Dialogue has a certain rhythm that works and is different from real speech. As we have noted before, real speech is rambling, disjointed, and static. One of the mistakes of a beginner is in not breaking up dialogue so that the characters ping-pong the lines back and forth as they do in *The West Wing*. There is a tendency to crowd too many thoughts into one speech rather than letting one character start an idea and then get a response, which leads to the next development of the thought. Long speeches slow down the show and lead to predictable responses.

INT. MRS. WALKER'S APARTMENT—DAY

A SERVANT ushers WINTERBOURNE into the crimson drawing room of a Rome apartment filled with sunshine. MRS. WALKER greets him and WINTERBOURNE kisses her hand.

MRS. WALKER

My dear Winterbourne! How nice to see you!  
How are you? How is Geneva?

WINTERBOURNE

Geneva is less delightful now that you no longer winter there. I am very well and happy to be in Rome again. How are your children?

MRS. WALKER

We have an Italian tutor for them, but he is not as good as the Swiss school and their teachers.

THE SERVANT ENTERS AND ANNOUNCES DAISY MILLER AND HER FAMILY.

SERVANT (WITH ITALIAN ACCENT)

Signora e signorina Meellair!

The fault in the writing is that Mrs. Walker asks two questions. Winterbourne then answers them in series. It would be better to revise it as follows to facilitate the flow of dialogue:

MRS. WALKER

My dear Winterbourne! How nice to see you!  
How is Geneva?

WINTERBOURNE

Geneva is less delightful now that you no longer winter there.

MRS. WALKER

How are you?

WINTERBOURNE

I am very well and happy to be in Rome again.  
How are your children?

MRS. WALKER

We have an Italian tutor for them, but he is not as good as the Swiss school and their teachers.

On the other hand, when Mrs. Miller speaks, her voluble aimless recitation is not a conversation. She has no social sense. While she rants on about her health, the camera shows Winterbourne trying to contain his boredom, his furtive glances at Daisy talking to someone else, and the leaping about of the restless Randolph, her twelve year-old brother.

## Pacing

The tendency of novice writers is to put too much of the story in the first scenes. Students typically are big in the first act and then find that their treatments underestimate how to pace the material. This fault is easily concealed in the treatment and always revealed in the script. One of the best ways to combat it is to make a step outline or a scene outline, also called a beat sheet. This prevents self-deception about the amount of material you really have to work with. It also shows you the storyline and structure in a way that the treatment does not. The beginner tends to peak too early and not to use subplots.

## The Beat Sheet

The beat sheet is basically a numbered scene outline that lays out the narrative structure of the episode in a similar way to a treatment. It identifies the scene setting and summarizes the action or plot development with paraphrases of dialogue. It is an instrument of television writing rather than movie writing. It helps to navigate the fragmented intervals of television playtime. Let us consider a beat sheet for an episode of *ER*. It is broken down into a teaser and four acts to fit around the commercial breaks. Here is a beat from Episode # 3 of an *ER* episode:

ADMIT - Where Weaver is introducing TEAM ER—her latest brainchild to unify and motivate her troops. Romano is down in the ER. He makes a disparaging remark about Carter, still none-too-happy to have him working here. Weaver assures him that Carter's only working half shifts and no traumas. Before he leaves, Romano spots Chen. Asks who's the daddy? Nobody knows. Fine don't tell me—as long it's not me. Huh? Malucci figures somebody must know who the father is. Everybody

has their own ideas. Bets are made. So begins the “Who’s the Daddy?” pool. Abby overhears Kovac taking a phone call in Italian. It’s brief but amorous, and Abby can’t help but eavesdrop, even if she doesn’t know what he’s saying.<sup>3</sup>

This gets fleshed out into three pages of production script. Some ideas still get left by the wayside. For instance, the betting pool about Chen’s pregnancy didn’t get into the final because it was probably too much of a diversion from the forward momentum of the story. Also, the beat sheet does not hint at the dialogue exchange between Carter, Romano and Weaver. Carter is a Resident who has come back from drug rehab, which extends our understanding of the characters. Romano is a mocking, sarcastic, nasty guy, and Weaver is the quick-witted head of ER.

ROMANO

Doctor Carter, when did they let you out?

CARTER

A few weeks ago.

Romano stares into Carter’s soul. Carter could try to do the same to Romano, but since the man has no soul, it’s pretty pointless.

CARTER

I’ve got a patient.

ROMANO

Go forth and heal.

Romano gestures for Carter to go, but then while he’s still within earshot—

So who’s watching the Drugstore Cowboy?

WEAVER

ER is my department. That makes Carter my responsibility.

ROMANO

Correct me if I’m wrong, Kerry, but didn’t he develop his drug addiction under your watchful eye?

WEAVER

Did you need something, Robert?

ROMANO

Do I need a reason to stop by and say hello?<sup>4</sup>

The dialogue and the character development is all part of the writing of the script beyond the story structure work of the beat sheet.

## Team Writing

Most television scripts are rewritten by teams of writers who keep the production line going with scene and dialogue rewrites right up to the time of shooting. Play time is fairly critical in the television world because time slots with commercial breaks are exact. You cannot run over. Some writers specialize in dialogue and are assigned particular scenes to write. The team is managed by a series editor. So what appears to be the uniform work of a single writer is often a team effort of multiple writers rewriting a half dozen times.

## Hook/Teaser

A hook is a device that gets the attention of an audience, involves them, and makes them want to keep watching. A teaser is a short scene that precedes the commercial break before the episode starts that contains a hook. It may also be the premise of the episode although that is not always possible and not necessary. Most television series and episodes have to provide something to whet an audience's appetite quickly because there are a dozen other channels, a dozen other choices. In the movies, this is less critical. Not that the story does not need a hook, but if you have paid for a ticket and you are sitting down with your popcorn, you are going to accept a more complex development of story and plot. It takes an enormous failure to make you walk out of a movie; it takes a minor lapse for you to hit the remote and check out what's on another channel. Major series often build interest with quick trailers inserted into earlier programming on the same channel. These trailers are often the hook. They also play at the end of the episode to entice the audience back for the next episode.

## The Series Bible

All series have a "bible" that describes each character, including back story, personality, past life and details of props, settings, and other information that enables new

writers on the series to stay faithful to the spirit of the series and true to character. For this reason, a head writer or editor will oversee the development of episodes. All writers eventually get worn out in series writing. Even the original writer who might have developed the idea for the series and written the first episodes gets weary and runs out of ideas. So there is a regular rotation of guest writers. This is why writing a “spec” script of a long-running series can be a good way to show your stuff and help an agent to get you some freelance work. Spec scripts are discussed at the end of this chapter.

## Condensing Action and Plot

We have already commented on the difference between reality and realism. Life is mostly banal—eating, doing the laundry, flossing your teeth, sleeping. Even work involves paperwork, long meetings, and totally undramatic data-entry at a computer keyboard. You can’t make riveting television programming out of such things unless you select key moments, condense activity and action, and shorten the screen time in a plausible way. So you need characters to walk and talk at the same time. You need to combine action and dialogue. Consider this example: In *Nash Bridges*, Nash and Joe and Katie are on the case of a psychotic serial killer who is murdering people who use cell phones. They have called him on the cell phone he took from a victim. He hangs up. As they stride purposefully through crowds to the car, Nash says: “Get the triangular on the phone and check all patients released from mental hospitals in say the last six months.” This scene condenses action and plot so that we know some background detective work is going on. Then we get these points across while moving from one scene to the next. This kind of efficient use of time, motion, and dialogue is typical of police and detective series, which always have to deal with a lot of off-screen detail, which could never be filmed because of time constraints.

In this same series, there is a lot of movement from one location to another. Nash’s trademark is his souped-up yellow convertible in which he and Joe roar from one part of town to another. This type of motion scene is useful to get through a lot of dialogue that fills in the plot or fills us in on background and provides personal interchange between characters.

## Target Audience

Although the seven-step method we developed in Part I is collapsed when dealing with a television entertainment objective, it is important, nevertheless, to give some thought to the demographic of a target audience. Shows that go on late at night are allowed to present more sexual themes and scenes than family shows. Broadcasters are bound by FCC language codes that exclude the kind of realistic dialogue

that movies allow and that some cable channels allow. So realism for underworld settings or gang worlds must find the style without the four-letter words. There seem to be fewer qualms, however, about showing explicit violence than showing explicit sexuality or including bad language. Cable television is less restricted. The brilliant new show, *Deadwood*, that came out in 2004 on Bravo portrays a lawless frontier town in South Dakota in the 1870's with a degree of realism about the western probably never before seen on movies or television. The foul language is relentless and persistent among uneducated greedy people competing for gold, space, food, pleasure and life itself. Wild Bill Hickock and Calamity Jane are passing through: The story is convincing, the writing brilliant and the acting first rate. The target audience is clearly adult and worldly wise.

## Script Formats for Television

As with writing for other visual media, the project should also begin as a concept, an outline, from which you write a treatment. The treatment is then made into a script. For the most part, two formats with some variations cover most television script layouts. The format most resembles the master scene script. Each scene is announced by a slug line. This is followed by stage directions in uppercase. The character name appears above the dialogue and is centered; the dialogue follows and is also centered. (See demo formats on the DVD and examples in the Appendix.)



INT. HELMER'S STUDY—NIGHT

HELMER AND NORA STAND IN THE CENTER OF THE STUDY.

NORA

Oh, Torvald, it hurts me terribly to have to say it, because you've always been so kind to me. But I can't help it. I don't love you any longer.

HELMER

And you feel quite sure about this too?

In a variation of this format, the script is aligned to the left margin and introduces act and scene numbers. The last variation is that stage and action directions are contained in parentheses. The Writers Guild of America has published a *Professional Writer's Teleplay/Screenplay Format Guide*, which they sell by mail order.<sup>5</sup>

## Comedy and its Devices

As Sam Goldwyn once said, “Our comedies are not to be laughed at.” Comedy has a great range on television, from crude put-down humor to witty and clever portraits of human behavior. Contrast *Married with Children* with *Seinfeld*! *Murphy Brown* was a very successful comic vehicle for Candice Bergen and was the pioneer series that uses the medium of television itself as a setting. *Murphy Brown* is a star television anchor and journalist, known for her acerbic wit, sarcasm, and vaulting ego. The comedy turns frequently on bringing her down to size. It parodies television production behind the scenes.

## Running Gags

A running gag, as the name suggests, depends on repetition. It keeps running. The premise of the gag is known to the audience so that each new exploitation of the gag gets a rise from the previous one. You keep going back to the same premise to work it from another angle. A lot of comedy is enriched by this device. *Just Marcy* is a student-written and student-produced pilot for a television series. The complete script and some video are reproduced in the DVD. It is about a college-age girl who needs to find a roommate. She has money problems and her landlord is threatening to evict her unless she pays the arrears. This creates the pressure to find a roommate.

We can illustrate the comic device of the running gag with the following situation. Marcy has the landlord at the door. She is showing a new roommate around. The audience knows something that the roommate character doesn't. So her responses are doubly funny. The scene is built around the physical action of going back to the door where the landlord is waiting. Each time Marcy appears, comedy ratchets up a notch. Marcy is showing the prospective roommate around when...

THE DOORBELL RINGS

MARCY

Can you hold on for a minute

SHE ANSWERS THE DOOR, ITS HER LANDLORD.

MARCY (CONT'D)

Oh my god, Mr. Jacobs, hi.

MR. JACOBS

I want the rent.

(he says in a monotone voice)



MARCY

Can you hold on for just a minute?

SHE CLOSSES THE DOOR AND GOES LOOKING FOR SANDRA.

**SCENE THREE**

INT. MARCY'S ROOM—MOMENTS LATER

(MARCY, SANDRA)

MARCY

Sandra?

SANDRA

Oh I just love this room.

MARCY

This is my room. Let me show you the room  
for rent.

**SCENE FOUR**

INT. SANDRA'S ROOM—MOMENTS LATER

(MARCY)

THEY WALK INTO THE OTHER ROOM AND THEN THE DOORBELL  
RINGS AGAIN. MARCY GOES TO THE DOOR.

**SCENE FIVE**

INT. MARCY'S FRONT DOOR—MOMENTS LATER

(MARCY, MR. JACOBS, SANDRA)

MR. JACOBS

\$500 dollars for last month ...

MARCY SHUTS THE DOOR AND RETURNS TO SANDRA.

**SCENE SIX**

INT. MARCY'S KITCHEN—MOMENTS LATER

(MARCY, SANDRA)

SANDRA

WOW! I really like this place.

MARCY

About the rent ...

SANDRA

You know I'm really desperate. My roommate  
just kicked me out and ...

MARCY

\$500 for last month's rent

SANDRA EXPRESSES CONFUSION.

MARCY (CONT'D)

... I mean this month's ...

THE DOORBELL RINGS AGAIN.

MARCY (CONT'D)

I'll be right back

SHE HOLDS UP HER FINGER AND RUSHES TO THE DOOR.

#### **SCENE SEVEN**

INT. MARCY'S FRONT DOOR—MOMENTS LATER

(MARCY, MR. JACOBS, SANDRA)

MR. JACOBS

(he has his arms folded on his chest and  
is glaring at Marcy)  
... and \$500 for this month.

MARCY SLAMS THE DOOR AND GOES BACK TO SANDRA.

#### **SCENE EIGHT**

INT. MARCY'S KITCHEN—MOMENTS LATER

(MARCY, SANDRA)

SANDRA IS STANDING BY THE TABLE.

MARCY

Sorry to keep you waiting ...

(she is slightly out of breath as she speaks and smiles)

... and \$500 for this month ... I mean next month ...  
no, I mean, you know, a deposit.

SANDRA TAKES OUT HER  
CHECKBOOK. MARCY'S EYES GO WIDE.

MARCY (CONT'D)

Er ... you wouldn't have cash by any  
chance?

SANDRA

A thousand dollars in cash?

(Marcy shrugs)

How do you spell your name?

MARCY

Mr. Jacobs ...

SANDRA DOUBLETAKES

MARCY (CONT'D)

... I mean, just leave it blank, ok.

SANDRA

Whatever you say, roomie.

SANDRA HANDS HER THE CHECK. MARCY GOES STRAIGHT TO THE DOOR AND  
OPENS IT.

#### SCENE NINE

INT. MARCY'S FRONT DOOR—MOMENTS LATER

(MARCY, MR. JACOBS, SANDRA)

MARCY OPENS THE DOOR.

MR. JACOBS

Now, or you're outta here.

MARCY HANDS HIM THE CHECK. MR. JACOB'S JAW DROPS. SHE SHUTS THE DOOR AND GOES BACK TO SANDRA.



(Read the complete script and see how the scene plays in the DVD.)

Each time Marcy answers the doorbell, the gag builds and the scene intensifies the comedy at the door with the prospective roommate.

A good example of the running gag happens in the opening of the pilot episode of *Murphy Brown*. The characters are sitting around in the production office discussing the lead character who is about to make an entrance after a month's rehab at the Betty Ford Center. First, we see Corky, the ex-Miss America beauty queen who has been hired to stand in for Murphy during her absence.

CORKY

You know, when I was asked to fill in for Murphy, I couldn't believe it. It was kind of like the time I became Miss America. Did I ever tell you about it?

FRANK/JIM

(NOT AGAIN) Oh, yes, uh-huh. You definitely did. I'm crazy about that story.

Frank now formulates a bet that Murphy will come back a changed woman. Corky keeps plugging her ego-centric story.

CORKY

It was so incredible when they announced my name . . . first runner up, Corky.

JIM

Murphy'll never change. Once a pain in the butt, always a pain in the butt.

FRANK

Jim, we're talking a month at the Betty Ford Center. Remember the segment I did on that place? They knock the stuffing out of you. Come on. Ten bucks. (TAKES MONEY FROM POCKET)

Now the running gag about Corky and her self-adulation comes back while Jim and Frank continue to ignore her. The second running gag and the big one is the bet. It drives the opening scene and heightens the hook that keeps the audience watching because it also builds up anticipation of who this person is that they are all waiting for. Will she be like their description? The running gag serves a dual function of being funny and building the action. Now Jim on the other side of the bet argues:

She'll insult at least three people, grab a cup of black coffee and bum a cigarette. Then she'll lock herself in her office until she has the perfect piece for next week's show. As usual.

(TAKES OUT MONEY)

You're on.

THE ENTIRE OFFICE BEGINS THROWING TEN DOLLAR BILLS ON DESKS AS MAJOR BETTING GETS UNDERWAY.

Now we get the grand entrance of Candice Bergen as Murphy Brown. She is nice to everybody and Jim loses the bet and hands over money. Then we hear Murphy Brown:

MURPHY

(REALLY PISSED)

Okay! Which one of you turkeys put their greasy fingerprints all over my Emmy?

FRANK

All right! She's back!

MONEY ONCE AGAIN CHANGES HANDS. FRANK GIVES MONEY BACK TO JIM.  
JIM WALKS AWAY AS MURPHY COMES OUT OF HER OFFICE.

The running gag of the bet gives momentum and structure to the comedy. The running gag of Corky's Miss America hang-up will continue to work in this and other episodes. It is attached to the character. Each of the characters will have a trait that the writer and the actors will continually milk for effect. Most of them have to do with self-image. Murphy's self-conceit and bluntness or Jim's up-tight personality are the fuel that makes the comedy run. Other series work in similar ways.

A character often has a foible that generates endless comedy. Take the character of George in *Seinfeld*. He is slightly pompous and always trying to get even for an insult or involved in a convoluted scheme to get one up on some adversary. We know his character and can't resist the pleasure of his downfall or of his being exposed and brought down to size. Part of the reason is that we see an aspect of ourselves in this character.

## Visual Gags

Visual gags help comedy in a visual medium. If every joke is spoken, every piece of humor is verbal, the visual potential of the medium is wasted. In an office comedy, someone hiding under a desk, or in a domestic comedy, someone trying to dress up in disguise, or someone trying to hide evidence of a mistake, all make the camera an ally and engage the visual part of the audience's brain. The tradition goes back to vaudeville stage gags if not further. Shakespeare used visual gags. Think of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* dressing in yellow stockings and cross garters to please Lady Olivia because he thinks she has suggested it in a letter forged by the Fool, Sir Toby Belch, and Sir Andrew Aiguecheek to trap his vanity. Chaplin articulated the visual gag for the camera together with Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton in silent film. Without a sound track, the comedy depended on visual gags. The Marx brothers evolved comedy for the screen by combining visual gags with verbal wit. Early television gave *The Three Stooges* a lot of scope for fairly crude visual comedy. Someone being hit with a ladder when his friend turns around has its limits. Comic violence shades off into a kind of sadism that is evident in huge numbers of animated cartoons in which Tom gets endlessly flattened or blown up by Jerry.

A student of mine developed a great visual gag. The story is about two Jamaicans coming to visit their cousin in New York. The INS thinks that they are illegal immigrants, although we learn later that this is a case of mistaken identity. Meanwhile, they have to do something. So when the immigration officer comes to the apartment, he finds them dressed up as women. The dialogue is hilarious and the scene all together succeeds very well. It also complicates their other ambition, which is to find American girlfriends whom they can marry so as to stay in the country.

## Double Takes

Like many comic devices, the double take is a compact with the audience. The character takes an extra long time to react to a put down or before delivering a reply. Although it can be an acting technique, it is also very much a comic

effect that can be written into a script. It needs the right line or situation with an indication in the script. You do this by writing PAUSE, BEAT, or even DOUBLE TAKE.

## One-liners and Laugh Lines

One-liners are the staple of situation comedy. Characters say lines that stand alone and get a laugh track because they are snide, funny, sarcastic, self-evident comments about another character or a situation. Most sitcom characters, especially those that head up a series, are given one-liners as a regular feature of their episodes.

Consider this example. It's Frasier's birthday. His father wants to make a fuss by making him a special breakfast. He announces: "I got you a newspaper from the day you were born." Frasier replies with a typical television comedy would-be clever one-liner: "I told you to clean out that closet." It's the kind of line that does not require a response. It is just comic embellishment for the audience's gratification. Most television dialogue involves some kind of insult or put down. It's pretty low-grade humor on the whole. It really continues a vaudeville tradition. Comedians like Jimmy Durante, Sid Caesar, Eddie Cantor, and Abbott and Costello were all familiar with playing visually to an audience.

Radio comedy necessarily had to do without the visual comedy. Then the radio broadcasters also became the television license holders. The radio comedians like George Burns, Jack Benny, Fred Allen, and Ozzie and Harriet were co-opted into television. The writers were radio writers. Skit writing with clever one-liners migrated into television from radio comedy, which in turn had grown out of vaudeville. Some of this writing style of the double take, the setup, and the put down still thrives in sitcoms. This writing developed when the shows moved to the West Coast television production facilities from New York.<sup>6</sup>

## Sitcoms

Laugh lines and one liners are typical of sitcom writing. Although the line should fit the character who delivers the line, such lines rarely depend on the plot or advance the plot. They are opportunities that are almost stand alone or added on to the situation. In one sitcom, *The Nanny*, Fran Drescher is in the hospital about to have an operation or biopsy. One of the characters talks about notifying her parents:

"They're on their annual pilgrimage to the Holy Land."  
"Jerusalem?"  
"Miami!"

It's cute; it's funny; it's in keeping with the Fran Drescher character. Then we move on with the story.

## New Techniques and Innovations

*Once and Again*, a new CBS series in 1999, was an exciting new departure in television writing that took creative risks. It avoided the formulas of soaps and most of the clichés of potted plots and canned emotions. It was and is the polar opposite of the soap. It is the story of two families whose parents are separated or divorced and whose children, of teen, adolescent, and pre-adolescent ages, are trying to cope with growing up in a splintered household. The love relationship between the divorced father of one and the separated mother of the other family magnifies the problems of each family. The mature television writing manages to capture some of the texture of middle-class American family life. The portrait of angst adolescents feel about their parents and the parents about their children rings true. More than any other series, this one tries to document the scale and amplitude of people's emotions and reactions to the everyday events and crises of American middle-class life. It has comedy, tragedy, and ordinary and extraordinary moments. The writing is clearly at the foundation of this series even though the acting is flawless, especially that of the young actors. At every moment, the depiction of a certain kind of contemporary living experience is seamlessly convincing.

JESSIE SAMMLER

This isn't how I am.

KATIE SINGER

What do you mean?

JESSIE SAMMLER

Sarah's really giving the impression that... she's acting like this is just some big contest. Like you have to choose. Like, if you're friends with me then you can't be friends with her and... that is SO not how I am, and it's so stupid, and I just think that we should...

KATIE SINGER

I choose you.

JESSIE SAMMLER

What?

KATIE SINGER

I choose you over her.

JESSIE SAMMLER

But I don't want anybody to choose anybody.

KATIE SINGER

I know you don't, but... I can't help it.

The writing also experiments with an innovative technique of cutting away at key emotional moments to a black-and-white interview of the character talking to the audience about his or her innermost thoughts. It is a television equivalent of the theatrical aside. It allows us to learn more about the character's point of view and to see the interweaving of past and present into a complex tapestry of emotions and gestures. This could have been artificial and disturbing to the emotional experience of the viewer. Quite the opposite occurs, however. The black-and-white shot differentiates the interior monologue from the external drama. We recognize a level of emotional truth in the characters that has rarely been seen on network television. This kind of complex narrative developing over many episodes is more difficult to write and produce.<sup>7</sup> The advantage can be that once an audience is hooked, they will follow the story week after week. However, this series was above the low common denominator of television series and did not survive its third season.

Some of the innovation that we see in television series may be the result of direction or editing. There is a tendency to borrow flashy camera moves and jump cuts from car commercials (see *Nash Bridges*). Effects such as posterization of exteriors or taking the chroma out of a scene or the use of slow motion creeps into drama and action-oriented series. Cutting techniques and camera movements are borrowed from the world of commercials where the need to condense messages and get the viewer's attention constantly pushes the envelope.

## Spec Scripts

One of the best ways to train as a writer is to write a "spec" script for a television series you are familiar with. You know the main characters. You know the format. You can invent within the premise of the series or sitcom. This is also one of the ways to demonstrate writing ability to producers and series editors who are looking for new talent, and also makes a good assignment in a writing course. It is a manageable assignment for all. Even if you don't succeed right away, it provides a valuable learning experience that will give you new respect for what you are used to consuming as a television viewer.

## Conclusion

Television is a big marketplace for writers. The range of programs is enormous from daytime soaps to prime time series and sitcoms. Although it is commercial and dominated by ratings, good writing does get into production—*Once and Again*, for example—as well as run-of-the-mill half hour comedies stuffed with laugh lines. There is a demand for writers and an opportunity, albeit highly competitive, for writers to break into established series with spec scripts. Almost all writing in the entertainment industry is freelance work, but television series hire staff writers. Staff writers can become head writers. Writers can also become producers and directors. The audience is large and the demand for new material never satiated. Over to you!

## Exercises

1. Pitch a new episode of *NYPD Blue*, *The Practice*, or *J.A.G.* to the class.
2. Write an outline for an episode of *NYPD Blue*, *The Practice*, or *J.A.G.*
3. Write a scene for a hospital drama such as *ER*. Check the technical and professional vocabulary that each character would be likely to use.
4. Devise a short scene with a running gag. First write one with no dialogue. Then write a different one with dialogue.
5. Write a scene that gives the audience visual cues about character without using dialogue or a voice-over. For example, a young college-age couple in love, or a senior couple in love. Then write a scene showing an engaged couple in which one of them believes the engagement is now a mistake.
6. Write a scene in which one character is trying to hide the truth from someone he or she loves.
7. Write a comedy scene with plenty of one-liners.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>We covered writing for documentaries in Chapter 8. News writing is journalism, which is a different type of writing that is not covered here.

<sup>2</sup>Aaron Sorkin, *The West Wing Script Book; Six Teleplays*, Newmarket Press, New York (2002), pp. 80-81.

<sup>3</sup>Written by R. Scott Gemmill. (c) Warner Bros. Television. All rights reserved.

<sup>4</sup>Written by R. Scott Gemmill. (c) Warner Bros. Television. All rights reserved.

<sup>5</sup>The price including postage is \$4.55 from Writers Guild of America, East, 555 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019.

<sup>6</sup>I am indebted to Nancy Meyer for this background information and research presented in her paper, "The Situation Comedy Script Format: Its Evolution from

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Radio Comedy and the Traditional Screenplay,” delivered at the Broadcast Education Association Convention in Las Vegas in April 2000 at a panel I chaired entitled, “Who Invented the Screenplay?”

<sup>7</sup>The series, created by Marshall Herskovitz and Edward Zwick, won many awards. These two producers have been involved with numerous quality television and feature film production, which you can explore on [imdb.com](http://imdb.com).

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# Writing for Non-Linear and Interactive Media

## PART FOUR

In the 1980's, before interactive video became a reality, I was involved as a scriptwriter in a project to create a mail-order multimedia course to teach accounting to managers. A prominent business college in the U.K. saw a market for distance learning. It wanted to create a learning package that would enable working professionals to acquire the knowledge of the course without physically attending the classes. We built in some primitive interactivity by using three independent media: print, audiocassette, and videocassette. The videocassette was produced with planned pauses indicated by a subtitle on screen instructing the user to stop the tape and refer to a page in the manual to read in-depth background. Similar cues were recorded on the audiocassettes. The video dramatized a business situation; the text provided facts and figures and exercises; and the audio tape had testimonial from managers.

Today, we would create hyperlinks to audio files or video clips, or hyperlinks from picture to text. This kind of continuing education could now be run through a web site and a listserve or packaged on a CD-ROM. So you can see that interactive multimedia is actually a technical response shaped by the longstanding need to interrelate media and build in user input. Current computer technology enables that need to be filled. Interactivity is now a fundamental component of new media and an increasingly common feature of traditional media. The term "new media" is often used to describe interactive media. The Writers Guild of America considers

this kind of writing to include “not only video games, but also content developed for other digital technologies, including the Internet, CD-ROMs, DVDs, interactive TV, wireless devices, and virtual reality.”<sup>1</sup>

In the early 1990s, the multimedia computer was a novelty. Now multimedia functions are standard. The idea of interactive multimedia developed in fixed media because all the media components could be assembled on the desktop. Code could be written so that by mouse click and key stroke, the user could navigate around the content. The first exploitation of interactivity on the multimedia computer was informational. Fixed interactive media preceded web sites because the CD-ROM was in circulation before the web had become established. The importance of fixed interactive media was really signaled by the breakout Multimedia Convention that set up separately from the main convention floor of the National Association of Broadcasters in 1994. It occupied a ballroom in the Las Vegas Hilton. By 2001, it had grown so large that it occupied another entire convention center at the Sands. With the expansion of the Las Vegas Convention Center, the multimedia trade show moved back under the same roof as the broadcasters, which mimics the convergence of media on the desktop.

While this book was being conceived and written, the audiovisual world was in ferment. It continues to evolve and change. This phenomenon of change is something we have to learn to live with as Alvin Toffler pointed out in his seminal and prophetic work *Future Shock*.<sup>2</sup> It is a truism that media technology is evolving at an exponential rate. It is not just the increase in speed and memory and the decrease in the size of computers. It is the new applications and their impact on the skills we need to function in the workplace. Knowledge workers need tools to manage and process information. The speed and efficiency of these systems is the key to the new economy of information technology.<sup>3</sup> The convergence of video in digital format and digital computer processing brings about the possibility of universal networked interactive multimedia. Broadcasting becomes netcasting. A screen becomes the display for any and all possible communications media. Since the first edition, we have seen the burgeoning of hand held computers, personal digital assistants, multi-function cell phones, and wireless networking. In our homes, we are going to have to shift from analogue to digital video and TV. We are going to be buying new wide-screen television sets. Producers will have to create program content in the new high-definition standard. Professional cameras are now all digital and switchable between the two aspect ratios of standard TV and HDTV. DVDs offer 9 gigabytes of storage, which is sufficient to encode a full-length feature film plus out-takes, background story information, and eight channels of audio. Distributors can put multiple language versions of a movie on one DVD. Movies are being distributed in interactive versions with the out-takes and alternate angles included such that the viewer can alter the edit by remote control. Information about the production, the actors, and the making of the movie are also commonly included.

All this alters the way producers, writers, and directors have to think about media. It is hard to predict how this might impact television dramas and sitcoms, let alone feature films. Cable providers offer retrievable digital content and embed

program and other information in all channels accessible through the remote control. Television programs are linked to web sites which extend the program. WGBH in Boston produces the documentary program *Frontline*, which puts up subtitles of the URL where further information about the program can be found and where online discussion about the program can continue. When television and internet are delivered over the same pipe and on the same screen, television will become increasingly interactive so that viewers can shop for products that are “placed” in the program. One can imagine that objects will be clickable to take the viewer to a website where a purchase can be made on line.

Even before digital video, video boards in computers allowed us to bring live-action video into the computer and thereby combine live action, graphics, animation, still pictures, sound, and text. Computer games and other types of interactive software that take advantage of this multimedia environment are familiar to most of us. The Internet has given birth to the World Wide Web and a form of interactive communication that exploits the multimedia capabilities of computers. Every computer is now built with integrated video, sound, graphics, and ethernet or modem network connections that make it a multimedia computer. We are now used to user input that modifies the playback or viewing experience by means of hypertext and hyperlinks.

The general conclusion we have to draw is that whatever we know and accept now as visual entertainment will change. Nor is it difficult to foresee ever-increasing instructional and educational use of this kind of interactivity combined with multiple media on CD-ROMs, DVDs and web sites. Corporations and universities use web sites for interactive learning. Production companies whose business was creating videos now have to be able to design and produce CD-ROMs and web sites or go out of business.

The interactive combination of the computer and the World Wide Web with its open architecture reveals new opportunities every day for learning, training, entertainment, and commerce. Think content! Wherever there is content, there is writing. More writers are needed. New media require changes in the conceptualizing and the writing that precedes production. Scriptwriters have to acquire new skills and learn new kinds of visual and structural writing techniques. However, these new writers have to be able to think differently (for Mac users, read “think different”) and write for media that are no longer linear. They are nonlinear.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>See Writer’s Guild of America West’s web site at <http://www.wga.org/>

<sup>2</sup>Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock*. New York: Bantam Books, 1991. See also *The Third Wave* (Bantam Books, 1990), by the scene author

<sup>3</sup>Bill Gates, author of *Business @ the Speed of Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), makes the case that the success of any enterprise now really depends on the speed and efficiency of its digital nervous system, meaning its total internal and external communications.

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# 13

## Writing and Interactive Design

### Defining Interactive

First of all, we need to define more closely what we mean by the term “interactive”. Although interactive media were enabled by the convergence of computer, video, and audio technology in the same digital environment at the end of the twentieth century, there are previous examples of interactive structures in our culture. Although the term “interactive” is new, the phenomenon is not. We can even see this before the Gutenberg era of print media, which is only now being displaced by information technology. Although we associate books with print technology, a book is a piece of technology that preceded the printing press. Medieval monks wrote books with numbered leaves of paper or vellum bound together in a sequence so that the reader could keep the printed matter in a compact space and access any part of it very readily. Consider some of the alternatives—clay tablets, parchment scrolls, or palm leaves sewn together—all difficult to handle and absolutely linear. Those more primitive technologies use the writing medium in a sequence that is analogous to a straight line. You have to move along it in one direction, forward or backward, starting at the beginning or at one particular point. If you are in the middle of a scroll and you want to consult the beginning, you have to roll the scroll backwards, just as you have to rewind a videotape.

In the fifteenth century, the printed book was a stunning piece of cutting-edge technology that changed European civilization and had a revolutionary impact on social and political culture somewhat like the computer and the Internet do today. Books and magazines will not disappear soon because this technology is still very effective. Consider this book you are reading now! In a flash you can look at the table of contents, the index, or the glossary and go back to the chapter you are reading. In addition, of course, you can open a book at any chapter. Surely, this

is the beginning of user input—namely, interactivity. Early on in the five hundred year history of printing this structural design was exploited to make dictionaries and, later, encyclopedias. This type of book is nonlinear in design. You open it at any point of alphabetical reference and you move between pages that are cross-referenced. This is also the logical model for hypertext that is now integral to the World Wide Web. Dozens of reference books, including the commonplace telephone directory, were never designed to be read in a linear fashion, but consulted in an interactive fashion. Did you ever meet anyone who reads the telephone directory, the dictionary, or even an encyclopedia from end to end? Can you imagine a telephone directory or an encyclopedia as a scroll? Most of the knowledge in the ancient world was recorded on these primitive handwritten media.

Interactive means that the reader or user can make choices about the order in which information is taken from the program. You cannot get information from the Yellow Pages without making choices. You cannot progress through a web site experience or a game or a training program without making menu choices or activating a link that starts a new chain of choices. Whereas the information in a reference work is pretty much on one predictable level, the experience of a game or a web site is an open-ended discovery. It is not only about a number of choices but about permutations and combinations of choices. So the number of choices becomes mathematically very great. This is becoming problematic for some giant web sites. Users get lost. Sites have to incorporate search engines. The paramount issue of the day is how to design choice for the user that is efficient and clear so that hits on a web site lead to burrowing and deep exploration.

## Linear and Nonlinear Paradigms

Narrative works, whether in poetry or prose, appear to be linear in construction. Drama is linear because, like music, it plays out in time for a specific duration. We saw that one problem of writing screenplays is the linear play time that drives how you think and write. However, epic poetry from ancient time has usually been based, as with *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* of Homer or the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*, on a huge mythological background web of stories that is not strictly a linear narrative but a cluster of interlinked narratives. Even European works such as Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, or the peripatetic novels of the eighteenth century, such as Fielding's *Tom Jones* or Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, explore structures that are not end-to-end linear but layered or multidimensional and not necessarily chronological.

The Bible is an interesting example of both types of structure. Although the Old Testament is a broadly chronological sequence recording the history of the people of Israel, starting with Genesis, the New Testament is principally four parallel narratives. The Torah is still written out as a scroll and read sequentially throughout

the year in a linear fashion. The scroll is housed in the Ark of the Covenant and worshiped as the word of God in synagogues. The Christian Gospels were recorded in a nonlinear format—parallel stories about the same events in the life and death of Jesus. The structure suggests the difference in the spiritual teaching. The former is based on 613 commandments elaborated in centuries of commentary to prescribe every detail of life in a tribal existence. The latter is based on a single commandment that is universal. The Gutenberg Bible, the vernacular book that launched the era of print media and changed the religious and political structure of Europe, embodies the two narrative paradigms.

Interactive narrative paradigms have evolved rapidly with the advent of video games. This new dimension to storytelling makes the audience part of the story. In the most sophisticated examples of the genre, the player of a video game interacts with an imaginary world, determines actions for characters and influences the outcome. The development of artificial intelligence opens up rich new opportunities for interactive illusion.<sup>1</sup> At the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are experiencing the burgeoning of information technology that alters and develops preexisting forms of narrative and exposition.

It seems reasonable to argue that the human brain does not function in a linear fashion. It is more akin to a computer processor that multitasks and uses different types of memory. Physiologically, the human brain processes different sense impressions with different cells in different areas. Visual sensation is processed in the visual cortex and auditory sensation in the auditory cortex in the temporal lobe. Touch, which enables interaction through the mouse and keyboard, is processed in yet another sensory area of the cortex. We all know how we can hop between mental tasks and suspend one operation while we process another. Indeed, our lives seem to depend on being able to do this more and more now that we have the tools to exploit this potential of the human brain. All our memories, all our knowledge, and all our consciousness coexist with random access. We use them somewhat like a relational database but without the same efficiency or speed. We can even think and do two things simultaneously. Not only do we have to chew gum and walk at the same time, we have to multitask all day long. We drive a car, listen to the radio, drink coffee from a mug, plan the events of the day and talk on a cell phone. The way the human brain manages this reality stream and programs the actions that follow provides a nonlinear model. Linear media increasingly make use of multiple information streams. Television puts text titles on screen, or the stock market ticker under the news at the same time as the anchor is talking and the picture moving. It uses picture in picture so that the eye and brain must sort multiple streams of information simultaneously. Many channels have preview pop-ups of the next program in the corner of the screen so that the viewer is engaged in program planning while engrossed in current viewing, even of dramatic material that calls on the audience's "willing suspension of disbelief" (Samuel Taylor Coleridge), something that would never occur in the viewing experience of film in a movie theater.

## Combining Media for Interactive Use

Although we have probably always had nonlinear imaginations, we have not always had nonlinear media nor the tools to make them interactive. Our entire linguistic education encourages us to think, read, and write in a linear fashion going from left to right and from top to bottom. For traditional script formats for television, film, and video, we had to write for two media that can exist independently—sound and vision. Now we have additional media—graphics, animation, still photos, and text. So just as it is a bit of an adjustment to write a script with two or three columns, writing for interactive media will require a new layout to accommodate not only more elements of media production but also the nonlinear form and the interactive possibilities of the program. This is true for both interactive instructional programs and for games and interactive narrative. Because a script is always a blueprint or a set of instructions for a production team, we have to figure out how to express the interactive idea for the makers to build in that structural possibility.

What comes first: the chicken or the egg? Do you design the interactivity first or do you write the content? This is the key question for understanding the problem of interactive writing and design. This differentiates the challenge of writing content for linear media and writing content for nonlinear and interactive media. In the first, the presentation of content is predictable in flow and direction. Sequencing is critical to all the writing we have discussed so far. Suddenly, sequencing doesn't mean a thing because the user or player is going to choose the order of multiple possible content sequences by mouse click or button press. We are creating menus of choice. To continue the metaphor, we are used to starting with appetizer, soup, starter, going on to the main course, and finishing with dessert. We can serve wonderful sit-down meals in this way, whereas interactive experience resembles a buffet. You eat what you want in any order at any time. Some people may want to eat dessert first, or stay with starters. Like all analogies, this one is limited.

The point is that the relationship of one scene to another, one page of script to another organizes the structure of the resulting film or video. For interactive media, there is no such relationship. The order in which you write down something does not reveal the final order of the program or even the order in which the user can access it. You can write words to be recorded as audio, pieces of text for display on screen, or images to be created by graphics tools or shot on video, but this has no necessary relationship to the way all these elements will be arranged in an interactive program. Nor would these individual pieces of writing express the interactive relationship between them. That interactive potential has to be conceived, designed, written down, or represented so that it can be made or rather programmed.

You have to know that an interactive design will work. Interactive content cannot meaningfully exist without interactive design, at least only to a degree. How do you prove that the interactivity will work whether it is on a web site or a CD-ROM?

You have to write that interactivity into computer code that will make it happen. You have to use an authoring tool. The content or “assets” as they are often called—text, graphics, video, or animation—cannot be created first before design. It may not always be clear at the outset what media you need. These bits of content that might be greater or smaller or added on later are written as descriptions of what is going to come. The final result, what you are purveying, is an interactive click stream or a potentiality of interaction. You have to model a kind of prototype. The plan for this is difficult to describe in prose. A diagram seems to explain it better. This diagram is known as a flowchart. A flowchart can map the interactive idea more efficiently than lengthy descriptions of multiple opportunities for user choice.

However, the flowchart does not describe the content—the text, the dialogue, the pictures, or the video clips. Out of each node on the flowchart comes a piece of writing that describes a graphic, a photo, an audio element, a piece of video, or text. So you have to think in two dimensions. One relates to the content of a particular piece of media. The other relates to your overall interactive purpose across the whole. Let’s illustrate all this by some communication problems for which an interactive multimedia design would be a solution. We need to recall the seven-step method:

- 1 Define the communications problem. (What need?)
- 2 Define the target audience (Who?)
- 3 Define the objective (Why?)
- 4 Define the strategy (How?)
- 5 Define the content (What?)
- 6 Define the medium (Which medium?)
- 7 Write the creative concept.

Until you answer these questions, you cannot intelligently decide whether an interactive medium is the solution. Defining the objective is going to weigh heavily in making this decision. Many producers despair of corporate clients who come in and say we want a web site or we want a CD-ROM without knowing the communications problem and the objective. They see that rivals and competitors have these products, so they want one. It is essential to start by looking at the communication problem, rather than starting with the communication medium and then finding the solution that will use the medium.

A video game is an exception to this analysis because it is interactive by definition and by its very nature. If you are designing a video game, you do not wonder whether it will be interactive; you know it has to be interactive. You spend your energy defining the target audience closely and thinking about a strategy to make it different, new, or appealing to that audience. The objective might be to excel in

graphic realism or to innovate in streaming video or to create a totally engrossing imaginary world.

Let's start with the DVD that accompanies this book. The problem is that beginning scriptwriters have difficulty seeing the relationship between words on a page and the finished product. They also have difficulty translating a visual concept such as a shot or an image into a descriptive scripting language. Descriptions and illustrations interrupt the flow of reading. Wouldn't it be an advantage to be able to show a script and have a video clip to illustrate the scene? Wouldn't it improve understanding of scriptwriting terminology describing camera shots and transitions if you could read the definition and see or hear an example? An interactive multimedia lexicon is a solution to a need to understand new concepts. The objective is to make scriptwriting terminology more accessible to a target audience of college students who are not always good readers and who might not retain the concept by reading a definition. The strategy is to make it easy to use.

Consider the following initial proposal document that is the formal beginning of the project:

**Design Objective:**

The main objective is to provide an interactive tutorial for scriptwriting terminology and its use. The idea is to provide a lexicon that combines text, image, and sound to explain each term. An efficient interface and clear navigation are important so that the module is easy to use. The user can select terms in any of the three main areas—camera, audio, and graphics—to increase familiarity with scriptwriting terminology and have a better understanding of the industry-wide conventions for this type of writing. The strategy is to create an easy interface with interactive links that make all definitions two or three clicks away from any place in the glossary.

**Navigation:**

The flow is hierarchical with links so that the user has an opportunity to connect traditional text definitions via hyperlinks to illustrations in the medium itself—video, graphics, and audio. Each page has a button link to the other branches so that the user can move at will between topics. Each page is designed to offer a choice to a deeper level with button or hyperlink options that move the user through branching to a graphic illustration. The hierarchy has three levels and then a return back to the top or a link to another branch. There is a link to a complete alphabetical lexicon that itself links to every definition, e.g., "Medium Shot".

**Creative Treatment:**

Although the content is educational, the graphic style establishes a bright and user-friendly environment with clear navigational choices to click through the bank

of information. Each link has a visual change such as a new color or a rollover effect together with a sound cue to support the navigational choices. Apart from the text that defines the term selected, we see a choice of visual icons for each type of illustration that embody links to that illustration. For example, the camera movements are represented by a camera icon, the camera shots by a TV frame icon, the audio by a speaker icon. When an illustration is a QuickTime movie, we set it in a quarter frame with relevant text. The usual player controls enable us to play, rewind, and stop. Likewise, audio illustrations have player controls including volume.

Text definitions travel with the navigation from level to level. Choosing camera leads to a choice of three sub-topics: shots, movements, and transitions. So “movement” is added to the camera identity of the frame. Then at the next level, the specific movement is added: “movement—PAN.” A short definition is fitted into the layout with a movie frame and controls so that the movement can be seen as live-action video. In this way the information is cumulative. Links to web sites about scriptwriting and productions could add another dimension but would also distract from the central purpose, which is instructional.

The written proposal is a necessary start. It does not solve the many problems of design but rather states what they are. It does not enable you to experience the navigation, which is the key to the nature of interactive experience. In fact, between proposal and production many things changed as the reader can verify by using the DVD at the back of the book. The provisional flowchart included an interactive game that had to be abandoned because it would not really work in practice.

One of my students proposed an interactive project on national parks, something like a kiosk, CD-ROM, or web site. The idea appeals immediately. The Department of the Interior (specifically the National Parks Service) would be the theoretical client. The project provides a solution for dealing efficiently with public inquiries, but it goes even further and anticipates a need to promote tourism. Much of this type of information has no linear logic. Geographical location, wildlife, and recreational facilities need to be accessed through some kind of interface. The hierarchical content becomes enormous. The amount of content was far greater than ever imagined in the written proposal. In this case, the organization of the interface determines the content. An excellent example of this type of interactive guide has since been created called “The Adirondack Adventure Guide.” You can examine the design document in detail.<sup>2</sup>

Many projects get out of control and cannot be finished because the design-versus-content relationship is not understood at the outset. In a professional world in which you are paying graphic artists, videographers, and sound engineers to create assets at great cost, you cannot afford to ask for content in a script phase without an interactive design. What you are selling or what the producer is selling is the interactive experience, not the content per se. It is rather a way of experiencing and using the content.



## Breakdown of Script Formats

It is probably true to say that there is no industry-wide standard script layout for interactive programming. The layouts are still being invented to some extent. You will come across a patchwork of script formats. For example, if a game involves dialogue, then a scriptlet, or mini script, similar to a master scene script, might be useful for a dramatized section. An audio recording might be prepared like a single-column radio script. A description of a graphic can be a simple paragraph, but sooner or later, a graphic is going to have to be sketched in storyboard format. Finding ways to lay out the screens or sequences is probably manageable by common sense. You really need to group the different kinds of assets together. You need a shot list of all the audio and a folder with those scripts numbered or indexed to relate to a plan for the navigation. The same is true for video and graphics. The relationship between the scripting elements cannot be understood without this plan of navigation that explains the interactive sequencing and menu choices that must be built in with an authoring software like Macromedia Director. Although you need a written design document describing the objective, the interface and how the navigation will work, you also need a new kind of document which is a diagram of the navigation. It is called a flowchart. In short, you cannot write much specific content without a flowchart because of the nature of the production process. The sequence is:

- 1 Write a needs analysis defining the communications problem for the client.
- 2 Write a creative proposal demonstrating that interactivity is an answer.
- 3 Write a design document describing the interface and how the navigation will work.
- 4 Map the interactive navigation by creating a flowchart.
- 5 Create storyboards for graphics/animation.
- 6 Write key scriptlets for video, audio, text.

The key step is number three: navigation. It is difficult to describe it thoroughly in prose. Should a writer be drawing? In the new media world, the role of writer is breaking down, or the role of writer is expanding, depending on how you define your role. Is the writer the designer of content and the designer of the audience interface with that content? The answer ought to be yes.<sup>3</sup> The Writers' Guild of Great Britain maintains "that writers, rather than designers, should be composing the scripts for games."<sup>4</sup> This suggests that designers are writing and that writers need to encompass design.

The capacity to think about the final experience and media result before production resources are committed to the project has always defined the role of the writer. The writer has to have a grasp of what interactive code and computer scripting

language can do to describe interactive possibilities. The carriage builder has to become an auto worker. It is a symptom of change in the media landscape.

It seems awkward to introduce drawing, storyboarding, and charts into a work on writing for visual media. Writers do not necessarily have artistic skills. What if you cannot draw? If you do not conceptualize navigation, you take a backseat to some other member of the team. The question is whether the writer becomes a co-designer or just a wordsmith called in to write dialogue, commentary, or text. Perhaps collaboration is possible. Writers could also be designers and vice versa. There is a parallel between this and the writer/director relationship in linear media. Writers lose control to directors once production begins.

So what enables you to think about, conceive, and express navigation?

### *Branching*

The easiest concept to grasp is branching. The metaphor is a tree that starts with a single trunk and then grows branches, which in turn grow smaller branches until there are thousands of twigs with leaves on them. The directory structure of a computer hard drive in most operating systems is presented to the user in this way. You navigate through directories and subdirectories until you find a specific file. This is known as a hierarchical structure. It is not an interactive structure because you can only go backward or forward in your click stream. You find this out if you construct too many folders and subfolders. Computer directory structures can be very unwieldy unless you have a tool like Windows Explorer to look down on the branching structure from above and navigate around it. Those who remember MS-DOS will remember the tedium of switching drives and changing directories to find a file.

You are probably familiar with organizational charts that show a chain of command or a chain of relationships. The limitation of this model as an interactive plan is apparent as soon as you go down or up a few levels. The number of branches increases geometrically. Getting from one branch to another is workable if you look at a page because your eye can jump from one part of the hierarchy to another. If the structure has embedded sequences that are hidden from view through menu choices, we are stuck with a tedious backtracking procedure that is like turning a book into a scroll. The depth of certain web sites leads to real navigational problems. To return to the model of a tree, we need to be like a bird that hops or flies from branch to branch at will, not an ant that has to crawl down one branch to the trunk in order to go up another branch. Hence, we create hyperlinks between branches—active buttons or screen areas that switch us instantaneously to another page or another file. The cross-referencing can become very complex. You cannot link everything to everything else because the permutations and combinations would quickly become astronomical. This is the point at which you begin to design interactivity. You start to think about those links that will be either indispensable or useful. This thinking has to be set down. It is not just a crisscross of links, it must also be an interface that reveals the intention of your interactive design. You need

to invent a visual metaphor that immediately communicates the organizing idea. This is the visual imagination at work. Once again, can you do it in prose? Partly!

Although it overlaps graphic design, inventing and organizing content and designing the look are two different tasks. The organizing idea could be that you see a bulletin board. Each of the notes posted on it is an active link. For another example, you have a room. In this room each object has a visual meaning and links to the other areas of content. Doors or windows can lead to subsets of information. Obviously, the visual metaphor should relate to the content, the objective, and the target audience. If you are designing learning materials for children, you might want cartoon animals in a zoo or a space fantasy. If you are creating an interactive brochure for a suite of software tools, you would look for a classy and clever interface (say a stack of CD-ROMs that slide out when you mouse over) that expresses something unique about the applications. Once again, can you do it in prose? Partly!

Computers now depend on visual metaphors codified as icons to communicate functions: a trash can for Macs, a recycle bin for Windows; the hand with the pointing finger; the hourglass; the hands turning on a clock face; the animated bar graphing the amount of time left for a download. The visual writer has a talent that works with images projected on a screen and should be able to propose visual metaphors for navigation and organization. In fact, the best writers can manage content and communicate ideas precisely through visual metaphor and visual sequencing. So the visual writer has an imagination that can migrate from the linear to the nonlinear world. It is probably the key to your professional future and essential to a lot of media creation in the years to come.

You know the problem. Again, witness certain web sites, particularly university web sites! You spend hours trying to find your way through the maze. You also have to grasp the organizational idea presented in the home page. Web site design is a problem of visual organization but also of navigation. If you want to express an interactive idea, limiting yourself to writing only a word script would be like tying one hand behind your back when you can also draw a diagram with a purpose-built computer tool.

We can represent the linear paradigm as a piece of string. We thread beads—events, scenes, chapters, sequences—on the string to create linear programming. Once we break with the linear world, we have no specific model as an alternative. We should consider other analogues or metaphors of organization that will lead us out of linear into non-linear. For example, take the wheel! It is a non-linear paradigm. It has a hub, spokes and a circular rim. There is no beginning and no end. You can go from the center down a spoke (think link!) to any part of the circumference and vice versa. A variation would be a hub with satellites. You can combine branching with other structures after one or two levels, somewhat like a plan for an airport. Then there are pentangle patterns, which join up all nodes to all other nodes. A narrative journey can follow parallel paths with alternative routes, useful for interactive video games.

*Flowcharts*

A flowchart is a schematic drawing that represents the flow of choices or the click stream that a user can follow (see Figure 13.1). If you don't plan it, it won't be there. Although you can compel the user to make a choice, you do not know which choice. Although the user may think of choices that you haven't, he cannot insert new choices into the finished interactive program. If a link is not there, the user cannot put it in. He cannot build his own bridges or impose his own interactive design on a program that is already authored.

Interactive multimedia designers have come to think of the flowchart as the first step in designing interactive choice. This map or diagram of the interactive click

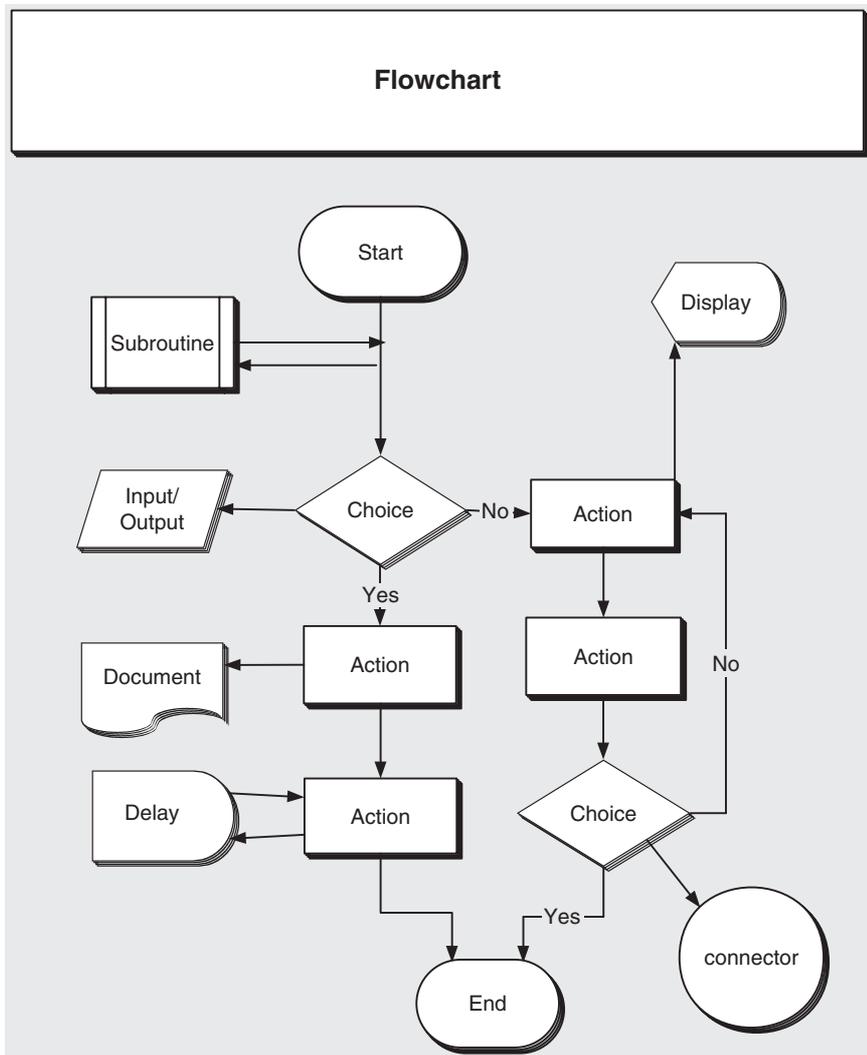


Figure 13.1 *Flowchart Symbols*



stream has become the ubiquitous planning document for interactive design. The problem of communicating the flowchart has resulted in a convention that reduces verbal explanations of choice to symbols. In fact, you can use the tables and boxes of a word processor to create flowcharts. More versatile tools exist such as Inspiration, Smartdraw, Storyvision, and StoryBoard Artist. Each has a dictionary of shapes and symbols and drawing tools that enable anyone to create a flowchart. How else are you going to design navigation?<sup>5</sup> These software applications were invented to cope with the complexity of relating navigation diagrams or flowcharts with multiple storylines to the text that describes scenes. You are able to manipulate text files and graphics in a way that is beyond the scope of word processors. Movie Magic also has a template for an interactive script format that you can consult in the Appendix.

### *Storyboards*

We saw that commercials and public service announcements made use of storyboard techniques to lay out clear visual sequences for clients. Storyboards are very useful for graphics and animation sequences (see the First Union example on the DVD). Computer software exists that enables the non-artist to visualize directly in the medium and design motion sequences for animation and live action. Storyboard Artist is a software program that allows you to create animated sequences out of a repertoire of characters and backgrounds that you can play as a movie.

## Authoring Tools and Interactive Concepts

To understand interactivity, it is helpful to grasp how it is constructed. All of the assets—video, graphics, text, audio—have to be assembled as computer files and set into an interactive script that plays them when the user clicks on a button or link. So all the scripts or scriplets of individual pieces of media do nothing until you orchestrate them into an interactive scenario by means of an authoring tool. This is a software application that writes a scripting language with commands in computer code that make the various files display on screen in response to user input from the mouse. You cannot author this interactivity from a script easily unless it is expressed as a flowchart. The way an authoring tool works illustrates exactly why scripting content in segments does not express the interactivity.

The professional authoring tool of choice for fixed media is Macromedia Director.<sup>6</sup> Video game authoring tools or programming software are often proprietary, such as Electronic Arts' RenderWare. The function is the same, which is to encode the interactive choices available to the player or user. In Macromedia Director, all the graphics, movie clips, audio clips, and text exist as separate cast members that are called onto the stage, that is the screen display, as "sprites". Each cast member, when it comes to the stage, becomes a sprite, which occupies a frame in a complex score (see Figure 13.2). Each sprite and each cast member can

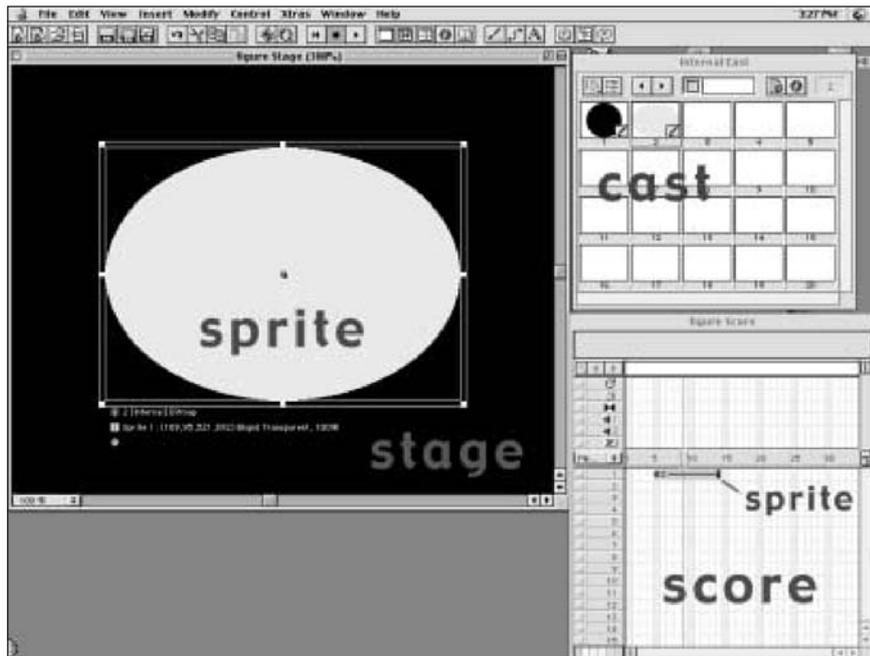


Figure 13.2 An example of Stage, Cast, Sprite, and Score in Macromedia Director showing their relationship.

be assigned behaviors that tell it to respond to a command such as “mouse enter” or “mouse down”. The way the score plays, with its pauses for user input that jumps from one screen to another, is controlled by a computer scripting language called Lingo. This code makes the events happen in response to user input—clicking on a button—or a rollover or a link to a web site outside the CD or DVD. The sophisticated coding of the score at the high end requires a programmer, somewhat like a movie or a video requires an editor, to create the final shape of the program by writing the Lingo code which tells the computer what to do.

From Director, Macromedia derived a web animation tool called Flash that copes with frames that move and layers of visual elements. The same software developer devised Dreamweaver for web site design so that you do not have to master HTML (Hyper Text Markup Language), which is the open source computer code with which most web pages are constructed. It is the primary computer language of the World Wide Web. There are many other web page authoring tools that put the web page designer at one step removed from HTML; nevertheless, webmasters still need to know the actual code that makes the pages work, both for the execution of design and for maintenance.

To summarize production: step 1 is to assemble the media elements; step 2 is to position the media elements on stage or screen display; step 3 is to write the interactivity by means of a scripting language; step 4 is to render it as a stand-alone

program that will play from a CD-ROM or DVD on any computer platform, or to translate it into HTML compatible code so that it will run on a web site.<sup>7</sup> Macromedia Director can also publish a Shockwave version of an interactive program, which can be embedded in an HTML document and played on the web.

It probably makes sense to divide the world of interactivity into two broad categories. The first is fixed interactive, including storage media such as CD-ROMs, DVD-ROMs, and proprietary disks or cartridges that companies like Sony and Nintendo use for video game consoles. When the program is completed, the producer publishes it, manufactures it, and distributes it in physical form. To change it means going back to the authoring tool and burning a new glass master from which to manufacture new disks. That is what we had to do to revise the CD that goes with this book for this second edition. In fact, we have changed from a CD to a DVD to gain real estate for all the new media content.

The second category is web-based non-fixed media, or interactive pages, uploaded to a server that is linked to a network. Most of the time the network is the internet. Then that site becomes part of the World Wide Web, which is a construction of unlimited connectivity between servers on that network. In practice, the network on which the non-fixed media work could also be a LAN (local area network) or a WAN (wide area network) not connected to the public internet or part of the World Wide Web. Many corporations and organizations maintain their own networks that work on the same principle as the internet, but you and I have no access to them. In fact, the internet itself was originally the growth of a Pentagon WAN (called ARPANET) to decentralize command functions, which was then used by the defense establishment and the research establishment to send documents and messages. The internet is simply a network that is not owned by anyone and to which anyone can have access so long as they can connect their computer to a portal, or an internet service provider (ISP). Companies that maintain the servers and the infrastructure of the network (fiber optic cable, satellites, microwave circuits) and provide access to this network charge a tariff and rent space on their servers for the web page files to reside and be accessible to browsers.

All this background is perhaps more than we need to know as writers. However, because of the relatively recent emergence of the internet, it seems wise to ensure this understanding so that we can see how writing is different for different interactive media, just as writing for movies is different from writing for television or video. The difference comes about because of the nature of production and distribution in each. Fixed and changing interactive media rest on different computer languages. One can be translated into the other, but there is a different functionality between a closed disk with a predetermined audience and use and a computer file open to anyone in the world with a computer and a connection to the internet. This difference is dramatized by the problem of hackers, who can enter and modify those files, whether on a server or on your computer. This is not true for a manufactured disk.

Now we should consider what kind of communication problems find better solutions in interactive media. Always remember that the writer is paid to think as much as to write. So the question arises whether traditional linear video will do a job better, or whether it is better to create an interactive solution. To think clearly about the uses of interactive media and understand how to write for them, we need to observe to what uses they are put. The uses are not always confined to either fixed or fluid media. For example, video games can reside on a web site or be distributed on a disk. Multiple users can access a web-based game, whereas only those with access to the player console have access to a game on fixed media. The same is true for, say, an interactive training or educational program. Broadly, the uses of interactive media are similar to linear media except that the new capability of interactive media allow some new applications. You can't use linear media for a kiosk in a mall, for example, where you want to provide shoppers with an interactive guide.

## Multimedia Components

Although the writer is not directly concerned with the production issues of making sure a program works cross-platform or is compatible with the average computer speed and RAM, it is wise to be aware of them. Any knowledge of how graphics, animation, and authoring tools work changes everything for a writer of interactive media. The more you know, the more intelligently you can write. If you make something interactive on Macromedia tools like Dreamweaver or Director, you get a much clearer idea of what the process is and what you need on paper as a planning document before you create assets or start programming. Just as a screenwriter should understand the language of cinema and how the camera frames shots and how shots can be edited, so a writer of interactive media would learn from using an authoring tool.

The interactive world is made up of several components: text, graphics, animation (2-D and 3-D), still photos, video, and audio. Each of these assets is produced independently with a different production tool. Some, such as text, graphics, and animations, can be created within the computer environment. Still photos, video, and audio originate in other media and have to be produced externally and digitized as computer files so that they can be edited with sound editing software and video editing software.

## Finding a Script Format

The jury still seems to be out on what script formats are acceptable to interactive media producers. No clearly defined format has come to the fore such as those that

exist for the film and television worlds. Published books that cover the subject in most depth cite a number of variants that leads one to think that the format can be tailored to the writer, the production company's established format, and the interactive nature of the project. *The Interactive Writer's Handbook* cites thirteen key elements in a design document. Some of them, such as a budget, schedule, marketing strategies, and sample graphics, require input other than the writer's. There is an area of overlap between layout, graphic design and visual writing. Graphic design is the technique of visual communication, not necessarily the visual conceptualizing of content that precedes it. The design document dreams up the idea and finds a visual solution to a communications problem. The graphic designer chooses fonts, colors, layout, and orchestrates the look and coordinates the esthetic detail to make the idea work. Writing precedes graphic design, which is a facet of production and execution of the vision. Visual thinking, which is a way of construing the content with an organizing idea, precedes conceptual writing.

Visual writing would come into play for a concept, a story summary, character descriptions, and an interactive screenplay. Where characters and drama are involved, a modified master scene script works very well to describe setting, characters, and dialogue. When characters have different responses depending on choice, the format has to indicate a numbered sequence of choices. *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?* has encounters with characters in different locations. Different interactive choices produce different responses from the characters, which give you information and clues. So in a given location, the character's replies are going to have to be numbered and related to where the player clicks on active parts of the screen. So the script format is going to vary with the type of project.

## Conclusion

Most writers of traditional media seem to be afraid of interactive media. It dethrones the writer to some extent. Linear media present the writer with a clear task, a clear role, and a definite authorship from which all production proceeds. Interactive media do not make the script the premise of the product. Writing is necessary to flesh out a design. A number of different writing skills can be employed in the same production. One interactive producer explained to me that he uses three kinds of writers: one for text on screen, one for concept, and one for dialogue or voice-over. Sometimes, he gets all three in one writer. This is why the writer is not the author of interactive media in the same way as movies or television.<sup>8</sup> Collaboration is, has, and always will be, indispensable to creative media program content. It seems even more true for interactive media because of the very nature of the medium. We now need to examine more closely the uses to which interactive media and interactive writing can be put.

## Exercises

1. Write an organization chart to document the chain of responsibility for an organization such as a company where you work, a college or university, or a club or other organization to which you belong.
2. Write or draw a logical branching sequence for an interactive CD on (a) pasta, (b) automobile racing, (c) solar energy, or (d) cats.
3. Devise visual metaphors for the commands, "Wait!", "Think!", "Danger!", and "Important!"
4. Describe the navigation in prose for an interactive CD on (a) cooking with pasta, (b) automobile racing, (c) solar energy, or (d) cats.
5. Write a flowchart for a simple game in which you have to click on a moving circle to score points, which are then displayed on screen.
6. Design an interactive multimedia resume for yourself.
7. Describe an interactive game based on a world concept. Describe the main characters and what the objective of the game is.
8. Write a proposal for a training CD-ROM that teaches the highway code for your state with an interactive test at the end.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>See the discussion on the International Game Developers Association website: <http://www.igda.org/writing/InteractiveStorytelling.htm>.

<sup>2</sup>See Writer's Guild of America West's website at <http://www.wga.org/>

<sup>3</sup>A sample of opinions by writers who have worked on interactive projects can be found in *Interactive Writer's Handbook*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, by Darryl Wimberly and Jon Samsel (San Francisco: Carronade Group, 1996).

<sup>4</sup>See <http://cgi.writersguild.force9.co.uk/News/index.php? ArtID=147>.

<sup>5</sup>See Smartdraw at <http://www.smartdraw.com/exp/ste/home/> and Storyboard Artist at <http://www.powerproduction.com>.

<sup>6</sup>See Phil Gross, *Director 8 and Lingo Authorized* 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Berkeley, CA: Macromedia Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup>See Timothy Garrand, *Writing for Multimedia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Boston: Focal Press, 2000) and also Darryl Wimberly and Jon Samsel, *Interactive Writer's Handbook*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (San Francisco: Carronade Group, 1996) Larry Elin, *Designing and Developing Multimedia: A Practical Guide for the Producer, Director, and Writer* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2000).

<sup>8</sup>Of course, the French new wave cinema has always asserted that the director is the auteur of the film. That is hard to see if the screenplay is an original.

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## Writing for Interactive Communications

# 14

In the last chapter, we drew a distinction between fixed interactive media and web-based interactive media that consist of pages of HTML code residing on a server. At one stage, it seemed a good idea to write a chapter on each. In the end, it became clear that the media writing involved is independent of the computer code or the type of authoring tool employed in production. The same distinction applies here that applied to our consideration of linear media when we found it useful to separate the writing in Part II: Solving Communications Problems with Visual Media from the writing considered in Part III: Entertaining with Visual Media. It is more helpful to group the types of interactive media according to their broad objectives. Some web sites are predominantly informational and commercial, but other web sites are dedicated to entertainment, whether it be zines, e-books, or online video games. Put another way, it is useful to separate, once more, writing that solves communication problems from writing that trawls the imagination to amuse, divert, and tell stories. Some web portals certainly combine both functions. A third category would be online journalism because not only are most daily newspapers in America also published online, but television news organizations also edit the same stories for their web sites, and web portals link to the journalistic side of their empires as well as to the entertainment side of conglomerates such as Time-Warner, which includes AOL and Netscape.

The World Wide Web looms over our world. It is the transforming phenomenon of the age. It changes business, life styles, leisure, commerce, journalism, education, research, and information so that there is almost universal connectivity. Interactivity on the web links web pages, known as hypertext or hyperlinks, embedded in pictures, graphics or animation. The link can be to a page on the same web site or anywhere on the World Wide Web.

Perhaps not everyone needs to be reminded of the distinction between the internet and the World Wide Web, but it is safer to plant that distinction firmly in our understanding. The internet is really a huge network of connected computers. It has a parallel in the voice network of the telephone linked through exchanges. In fact,

the internet began by the invention of modems that enabled computers to connect to one another using the telephone network. Then dedicated infrastructure grew to meet the need of this new network of servers. Now email and other data communications can be established between computers via various internet service providers utilizing cable, twisted copper wires, or wireless links between the computer and that world wide network.

The World Wide Web, however, is an invention of a new dimension to that internet by virtue of a connectivity built out of a new computer language, hyper text mark up language, known as HTML.<sup>1</sup> It is a universal computer language with open-source code. That means it doesn't belong to its developer like operating systems (excluding Linux) and other proprietary software programs do. Anyone can use it free of charge and also modify it. This language describes what a web page looks like as to colors, fonts, type, layout. In order to find web pages, you not only need a connection to a server that is the portal to the internet, you need a browser, a piece of software that will display the HTML code as a page on your desktop, and the universal resource locator (URL)—the web address of the location of any page. Since thousands of web pages are added to the web every day to the millions that already exist, the World Wide Web is pretty much inaccessible without a search engine. This software will scan all web pages that fit limiting descriptions you provide. You can enter a word. Or you can enter phrases in quotation marks, or use Boolean statements that limit the list to "Presidents" NOT "Republican", or "Presidents" AND "Vice-Presidents." Web sites are tagged by key words, which the creator puts in a header (called a meta-tag), and are also indexed for content by the search engines. Different search engines use different criteria and search differently to bring up a list of sites that potentially relate to your search.

## Different Writing for Web Sites

Web sites are now well established as a fundamental form of communication that can solve a number of communication problems. We should go back to basics. We can get further value from the seven step method set out in Chapter 4. The potential answers to the six analytic questions will lead to solutions that include web sites, which then require a certain kind of writing. The sixth step, which asks what media can deliver the solution, becomes the key to this present chapter. Understanding why we should choose an interactive solution is critical before selecting that option. Then choosing which interactive solution, fixed or web-based, becomes a further refinement of that selection. Let's remind ourselves of the questions and consider how they might be answered when interactive solutions are probably appropriate.

- 1 First we define the communication problem. Why would you choose a web site as a solution in the first place? What communication need does it fill?

- 2 Then we define the target audience. Who are the intended visitors to the site? What are their demographic and psychographic characteristics?
- 3 Now we want to define the communication objective. What is the purpose of the site? Sales, marketing, information, instruction, presentation, public relations, or personal?

We always need to ask ourselves about the strategy for achieving the objective. Think about all the web sites you have visited. Some of them, like Nike's and Red Bull's, are intensely visual with Flash animation, stunning graphics, and color experiences that require a visual response.<sup>2</sup> They demand visual thinking. Some sites are dominated by text and links. Other sites, such as Apple's, combine visuals and text. E-commerce sites have pragmatic features such as catalogues, shopping carts and secure payment links. Corporate web sites serve multiple needs that can include public relations, financial information for investors and shareholders, production information, recruitment of personnel, customer services, billing and payment capability, and finally sales.

Most internet portals, such as Netscape, Yahoo! and MSN, are somewhat like electronic newspapers. They present news, and some columns are rewritten daily or hourly. They are different from newspapers in that the home page is not the equivalent of the front page. A newspaper puts leading stories on the front page to complete them on inner pages. An internet portal is also a table of contents as well as a provider of leading stories. Most of the site has to be apparent on the home page. Sometimes this leads to too much business, distraction and confusion. The front page of a portal links you to many other types of information and activities, such as stock market and finance news, popular culture forums, chat, email, commerce, and specialized interests. Side bars list all the headings under which you can explore the site. There is no dominant theme in the homepage experience that many corporate sites try to achieve. Their home pages make a statement of corporate identity, mission and purpose, or the best do and the rest should.

We can apply our classifications from an earlier chapter on corporate communications that divide objectives into broad types: informational, motivational and behavioral. Without being exhaustive, we could categorize web site functions in the following ways:

- Informational: internet portals, government sites, library sites, colleges, corporations, newspapers, databases
- Motivational: entertainment, marketing, advertising, selling, porn, movie trailers, games
- Behavioral: e-commerce, shopping carts, payments, instruction, surveys, video games, email feedback

Many sites combine one or more of these objectives.



Linear writing, prose exposition, that is the centuries old model for print writing, requires a sequential development of ideas moving from a beginning through a body of argument or narration to some kind of conclusion. The whole experience of reading is contained in the pages of the article or book. In contrast, web writing, which at its simplest could be a box containing the equivalent of a print article, is not limited to linear delivery in a frame of text. The information or idea can be developed with hyperlinks that highlight themes in the article that explore, sideways as it were, tangents that supply a lot of detail about something that would otherwise interrupt the flow of the main text. It is the same idea as the footnote in print media. Many writers, especially those presenting factual arguments, want to back up their points with sources or comments or asides, which are then put at the foot of the page or at the end of the chapter. In a sense the web expands the footnote by making it interactive, by linking and branching to the actual source or another line of argument.

Another way of thinking about the difference of web writing is to see it as multilayered writing. By means of hyperlinks, panels, sidebars, fonts and colors, you can reach more than one audience at a time. In fact, a problem of web writing lies in the unpredictable demographics of the surfer in your domain. On some sites, there is something for everyone. It is like the sections of a newspaper. You go for the sports pages; I go for international news; someone else goes for the classifieds. Web sites are also the broadsides of the information age. In Shakespeare's time, a printer would put together a news sheet and run out on the street to sell it to curious passers-by until the innovation of the weekly and daily newspaper. Web sites look for passing trade among the surfers as well as formal communication generated by emails and published links. The bloggers, who might be private individuals with a passion or interest in some subject, providing some alternative views or sources of information, resemble the Elizabethan broadsheet publishers.

In Shakespeare's theater, every class of person from educated gentlemen to illiterate groundlings sat in the audience. The plays contained comedy, tragedy, vulgarity, sublime poetry, suspense, gripping plots, history, and profound psychology. Portals and browsers are a kind of internet theater. They have something for everyone. So what we encounter is an omnibus of writing drawn from multiple sources. Web sites make generous use of text. Some, like the portals of the major browsers, are cluttered with text leads and banners. So short effective prose that headlines ideas and topics does the job. To communicate effectively, you need to conceptualize interactivity and introduce effective, functional graphics so that the options and functions are clear. At the moment, the home pages of AOL, Yahoo!, Netscape, and other major portals and Internet service providers have a format that is akin to a newspaper front page, except that the headlines and tag lines are hyperlinks. Therefore, the writers and editors of these web sites need a strong background in journalism and in the editing of breaking stories and weaving together of a combination of news and entertainment. However, the home pages also use still pictures, video, color and graphic design to present opportunities to users.<sup>3</sup>



### *Multilayered Writing*

Most of us are so familiar with web pages that we do not stop to think how they get conceived, designed or written. Most web pages contain text of some sort, whether titles, headings or labels. We might call that design text, the same use of text that we find on posters, billboards and print ads. It has a graphic function as well as verbal exposition. Then there is the text that works like text in a book, a newspaper, or magazine. It is prose exposition. It is meant to be read for content. It reads like print media, even though it may incorporate hypertext links to other pages. Gutenberg technology survives inside the web site although the prose style may change in ways that reflect a busy screen full of banners and sidebars. Web site articles have to be written at multiple levels. The first level is broad outline. The succeeding levels amplify and link the story to an ever widening circle of archival and related materials.

In the early days of journalism, when the early telegraph could break down, or the correspondent could run out of money, wire stories were written with the most important, leading elements first. Detail and elaboration came later. This is called the inverted pyramid. A parallel problem exists today. Surfers come on to your site from all directions and may be bounced back off other links. A web site needs to follow the same inverted pyramid practice developed in wire service journalism so that leading ideas come first and the impatient surfer does not click away. A new dimension is the multimedia content that tempts surfers to click on pictures, listen to audio, or find out answers to leading questions like, *Is She Cheating On You? How to Tell*, or, *The Ten Hottest Jobs for Graduates*. There are tax tips, real estate advice, and celebrity news to distract the surfer and compete for attention. This changes the game from print newspapers and magazines. The web is a visual medium that is also a text medium. Although this primarily applies to web portals, there is a similar phenomenon on commercial sites such as Amazon.com. Who has not had the experience of searching for information on the web and then losing sight of the original intent of that search because of spontaneous response to hyperlinks that take you away from your main search? It is even possible to forget what you were trying to find in the first place, and what is worse, be unable to back up to where you started. The web is not just non-linear; it is organic.

### *Conceptual Writing Versus Content Writing*

Writing for a web site means thinking clearly and analytically about its function. We have raised the question of whether the writer's and designer's work overlap. Similarly, the writer and the webmaster's work overlap. Since a web site is a kind of living organism that changes, evolves and adapts over time, maintenance, pruning, and updating become critical to web success. Clearly, the webmaster is going to make decision about how to lay out and incorporate disparate and diverse elements on the web site. So let us consider this to be an editing function, not a writing function. However, interactive writing also includes editing and hyperlinking

of pictures. The interactive journalist can say more with pictures, video clips, and audio clips. This new media writer will have to conceptualize interactively and think more about the relation of text to other elements. Although interactive media are laid out visually, their content does not necessarily involve visual writing in the sense that we have defined it. The distinction lies in the difference between something that is written and read to be made into media as opposed to writing of text that is incorporated into this interactive medium. After all, a journalist or a feature writer for magazines could be published on a web site. Time Magazine and CNN stories and articles are linked to Netscape and AOL. They all belong to the same corporate entity. The rationale behind the merger of AOL and Time-Warner was to match content to the medium. Can this be considered writing for the web? Isn't it writing that is cannibalized for web content? The writing that has to be unique to the web is the writing that the surfer never reads because, just as the moviegoer doesn't read the script of the movie, it lies behind the interactive planning and construction of the site.

The most important writing, consistent with the writing philosophy of this book, has to be conceptual. Such writing is not apparent to the eye. The writing that analyzes the communication problem, articulates the solution in the form of a concept and then describes the functionality of the web site is design. The fruit of such thinking and writing is navigational design. Such writing leads to production of various kinds such as graphic design, audio and video recording. Thinking through the function of the web site, being able to translate that function into visual ideas, and organizing its content by visual metaphors would be the most critical piece to precede the costly phase of production. The internal content of a web page keeps changing, sometimes daily. The question of how the web site will serve a corporate communication needs writing of a different order—meta-writing—that relates functionality, look, and mission. It is the writing behind the writing. It is the writing that the audience does not read, as opposed to the written text on the web site that the user gets to read. Writing for the web and interactive media involves structural writing, that is, writing out the idea of what the content is going to be and how it will work. A well designed web site has to have a concept behind it that addresses its organization in terms of the structure, the links, and the layout. A thoughtful, creative proposal is essential. Call a writer—but a writer who understands interactive media!

On the web, we have broken with the linear through-line of content. Other paradigms for organizing content than beads on a string or an arrow become relevant:

- branching (tree metaphor: trunk, branch, twig, leaf)—it is hierarchical, navigation is arduous
- circle—anything on the circumference is connected; there is no beginning and no end, and all points on the circle can connect with all other points across the circumference

- wheel with spokes—this is really a variation of the circle, but with a center so that points on the outside connect to a single central point
- hub with satellites—this is really a circle with smaller attached circles or systems and sub-systems
- clusters—allow random relationships between groups of objects
- parallel paths—allow direction but with exchanges between the paths

In interactive design, these relational forms can be combined. Different structures lend themselves to different material so that ideas and media can be accommodated. Content can consist of clusters of cognate or related material, sometimes raw material. In fixed interactive media, such as a training module, the parallel path might be ideal to get to a goal. A web site allows unlimited links to source material that would sink a linear exposition. Branching in web sites is a natural tendency, but it can quickly lead to exponential increase at every level and to surfers losing their way, like ants crawling up a tree trunk.

## Web Site Concepts

If you wear the hat of a conceptual writer, you have to think through the function of the site. What is the objective, the purpose of the site? Again, we confront the writer/designer issue. It seems clear that this kind of writing implies design and therefore must express design concepts that in production become design features. A web site makes a statement. Many web sites make wrong or inadvertent statements. They are not only ugly but also confusing. A web site must almost always be functional. It must be clear to users how they can interact with the site and get what they want or get what you want them to get. A site makes a visual statement and it demonstrates functionality. The two should coincide and reinforce one another. A site has style and personality. In some cases, it is that of the creator, of that one person, but normally corporate communication is not personal expression. The site has to reflect the identity and mission of the corporation or the portal. More often than not, there is a conscious design, which a writer can articulate and a graphic designer and webmaster can execute. Why is web writing visual writing? A site makes a statement visually, verbally and functionally. Deciding how the home page should be organized is conceptual writing for design. Should it be bold and brash to attract attention like Red Bull's site? Should it be sober and functional for bank or financial services company to inspire confidence like T. Rowe Price? Should it be minimalist and intuitive to draw in the surfer like the Nike site? How much flash animation will succeed in visual seduction or, conversely, confuse the user. For example, the concept could include the idea of a feedback mechanism such as email in a "contact us" link. Writing out the idea for the web site is a thinking-writing function, crucial in all scriptwriting, and crucial to interactive media, both web-based and fixed.

Although a designer might make decisions about layout and build the look, it has to flow from a concept that unites function and look, articulated by a writer thinking through the organization of content. But maintenance then falls to the webmaster. A great many sites are put together in an impromptu way, making it up as you go along. We have to separate sites and writing intended to solve a communication problem from sites that are, if you like, pure expression.

## Writing to be Read on the Web

You see words on the printed page just as you see text on the web page. In fact, text dominates web communications. The Gutenberg concept of a page has migrated across to the web. However, web pages are not laid out the same way and do not restrict themselves to text. They make use of boxes, panels sidebars, color, different fonts and type faces, and, of course, animation such as animated GIFs and Flash animation, so that the eye is engaged visually by the design rather than the text. On the other hand, web pages have fallen back into pre-Gutenberg ways of arranging text—scrolls and folding palm leaves. We have the expression “scrolling” up and down to describe our navigation through a web page document. At the same time, there are navigation arrows or “next” buttons or numbers to jump to the next page. Page turning does not make for true interactivity. It is really more like a slide show or a PowerPoint presentation. Arabic and Hebrew read right to left and Japanese and Chinese ideograms read vertically. The web page seems to accommodate all possible ways of arranging and sequencing text. The writing of text for web pages has to be different from ordinary print media because text has to be organized in layers of hypertext with links that draw together concentric circles of information. So although paragraphs of text may read just like print media, the editing and thinking must take into account another dimension that does not exist in print media. Print media, or straight text, has backward and forward relationships, whereas web text has a third dimension, a vertical dimension, which links and positions it in a matrix of information or of associations.

If you monitor your own experience of surfing, common sense tells you that when you read an online article you do not always read it as a stand alone piece. More often than not, you find the article through links embedded in a previous text or in a list compiled by a search engine. So the web complicates life for the writer and the reader to some extent. Both can lose track of where they intend to go or where they came from.

So we come to the writing of the text we read in the columns and boxes that we find on a web site. The conceptual writer might also write this content, but there are legions of freelance writers who modify traditional print content to fit into the interactive environment. They have to think of reading as seeing. Although you read a web page, you also see it. It is a visual experience. Editors who work on web content have to incorporate those visual values. It might be a simple issue of

managing the fonts, the size of the block of text, the relationship of text to pictures or video or audio links. However, in the best sites, the visual experience arises from the conceptual design, which is visual writing.

## Navigation: The Third Dimension

Reading web pages involves navigation. So navigation is involved in writing web pages. This is the problem of the third dimension. Whatever you read, whatever you write, exists in a vertical context as well as a linear one like reading a book or an article. This has to modify the style of writing. So it makes sense to think carefully about links to offsite pages. Because hypertext is the same whether it jumps to a page on or off the site, the user does not necessarily know where he is. There need to be signposts. You can't look down every rabbit hole.

It must make sense to think about how you want to define the cyber-boundaries and how you allow or direct your user to leave the site. Some web sites are fairly self-contained and present opportunities for navigation around the site. Other web sites fan out with ever denser links. Most e-commerce sites will want to be self-contained. However, with Amazon.com, the links across the web through a title or a product become so heavily layered that it is easy to lose your way because of links. But think about the concept. Amazon is not organized to be self-contained because its main products—books and videos—by their nature take you down a road of exploration. Many sites compete within themselves for your attention. This is true of web portals. You are called to follow so many different directions and links, which are not necessarily related, that you become pole axed with indecision. This arrangement would not be good for a corporate web site. Clear navigation and accessibility govern successful interactivity inside web sites.

Consider the Netscape.com feature of "What's New", one liners in the form of questions or statements which excite interest and then send you off into an ever branching odyssey. I'll pick one of the day's list: "Teens and Sex: A Surprising Trend." These can be a distraction. It works for entertainment but not for business or corporate. Linking within a site helps organization. Linking to the web, or diverse sites, can fragment the user experience. You forget what you were looking for in the first place because you followed incidental links and ended up wandering in a maze of material.

## Writing Issues

Once again, we have to contemplate that fascinating transition from something conceptual written on paper to something visual and fully produced in the medium itself. We know that in the professional world, you cannot just keep this in one individual's head. Ideas have to be pitched to a client, costed out in a budget and communicated to a team of specialists who will translate them into concrete visuals.

Translating from the page to the screen—the computer screen, in this case—is the essence of the media business.

### *Concept*

Production methods and the role of scripting are not standardized and predictable in the way that they are in the world of linear media. Nevertheless, we can outline a best practice that will ensure a satisfactory result. If more than one person is working on a project, a written concept and more is essential. It is probably indispensable for a single creator to define a concept before committing resources.

### *Design Document*

A design document is unique to interactive media. It addresses the need to know two important characteristics of a web site—what it will look like and how it will be organized. Navigational design sets apart the pros from the amateurs. All interactivity is based on links. Anybody can create links. The question is whether the links serve a coherent purpose and whether the navigational idea is well communicated to the user. If this has any equivalence to the linear world, it would be to the treatment.

### *Flowchart*

No question about it! A flowchart is a diagram. The thinking behind a flowchart could be the responsibility of a writer or a designer. It does not require writing skills per se. It requires skills to order spatially and sequentially. Making this diagram is enabled by software such as Inspiration, Smartdraw and Storyvision. Whether a writer or a developer or designer or programmer does it, it has to be done so that the production team knows what it is trying to create. For each click and link, there is another page on screen. So it has to be designed and laid out and the assets necessary to that page assembled. The purpose of the flowchart is to chart the intended navigation to be presented to the user. It becomes a way of verifying functionality and a basis for a programmer to write the code that will make the links work.



### *Breakdown for Production*

Any given web page is comprised of multiple media. Each of these media elements is an asset. If your idea calls for a still picture, you have to create that picture or buy it from some copyright owner. If you need a video clip, once again you have to shoot it or buy it ready made from some source. A list of assets for each page of the web site must be compiled and broken down into production-specific categories: video, audio, graphics, still photography, and text. A production manager or project manager can assign to graphic designers or video producers or animators the list of needed assets in each category that have to be assembled for construction of the site. We could probably find that in practice, the writer hands over to the project manager, developer, or designer.

*Text*

Text, of course, is a job for a writer reappearing as a writer to be read. This writer may not be the writer/designer who conceptualized the site. Text content is itself an asset. It may be writing that is technical or that is based on specialized knowledge that has to be commissioned. Web writing differs from print writing because interactivity is part of the way it is put together and contributes to the experience of the web user. The use of colors in text and backgrounds changes the web reading experience. Key words or sources offer potential links in the form of tangents, statements, and questions. Writing for web content is visual writing in that it involves media other than text.

*Video, Stills, and Audio*

Images, video, and audio clips can enhance the user experience and bolster the content. The web writer has to write with multimedia content in mind and consider where additional content such as still photographs, video and audio might be appropriate. If a video clip or other media is anticipated for a given page, you may need a short script (we will call it a scriplet) to tell a video production crew what to shoot, or an audio technician what to record, or a photo researcher what picture to search for in the libraries or archives. Once again, this writer may not be the writer/designer who conceptualized the site.

*Applying the Seven Step Method*

To construct a site, without a doubt, we will want to go through the first six steps of the method outlined in Chapter 4 to come up with a concept. Many students getting involved in web site construction or interactive media want to compose their interactivity directly with the authoring tool and are impatient about the writing function that precedes it. It is important to keep in mind that what you do in college is free of commercial pressure, such as competition and cost. In the professional world, however, you need conceptualizing skills. Not the least of these problems involves cost. If you promise to build a web site or an interactive CD for x dollars and then find that it costs more than your estimate, you will be working for nothing or actually making a charitable gift to your client. I don't believe in corporate welfare. Back in the first chapter, we explored how the need for scripts arose in the early film industry for the simple reason that in an expensive production medium you need a plan. This same principle applies to interactive media. The more you can get down on paper, the more secure your project!

We cannot illustrate all the issues of concept writing. Suppose we are going to create a writing website. Let the domain name be MediaWriting.com. Although we have argued the importance of thinking through the six steps, in the professional world, this may not be presented to a client in writing. Personally, I always write a response to a client briefing setting out my understanding of the communication problem and my rationale for my creative solution. The six steps are embedded

in that preamble to the creative concept or treatment. We will begin with our six-point analysis of MediaWriting.com's needs:

- 1 The communication problem arises from the fact that many writers have ambitions to write for various media, mainly the visual media, and don't exactly know how to go about it. They need a guide, a writing clinic, a list of resources and information concerning the professional writing world.
- 2 The target audience is writers who have an ambition to write for corporate or entertainment media. They might be beginners or experienced writers who need a second opinion. We need to accommodate these levels. The interactive characteristic of the medium will facilitate self-selection.
- 3 The objective is to provide a reassuring learning environment that is also commercial and useful to professionals. A forum for writing issues and chat rooms should be directed at creating a virtual community. Training and script-reading and critiquing is fee-based. Click through signage is desirable to generate supplementary income. An email function is important for communication.
- 4 The main strategy has to be functionality. Some video clips and stills might help break up text, but the main visual impact has to be in the look and design. It has to be clear and to the point in delivering services and information. The look and design should be professional and attractive.
- 5 The content comprises: tutorials for purchase; advice columns; a forum; a chat room for writers; a virtual bookstore with click through links to Amazon.com; a resources guide that includes lists of agents; links to other writing web sites and competitions; script reading and doctoring; corporate scriptwriting service for clients; e-mail; a hit counter; script samples; the author's writing; a personal profile.
- 6 There is dynamic interaction between users over the internet. Because this function involves interactive exchange, the web is the unique medium that can deliver all this. Everything is updateable.

Step 7, as you will remember from Chapter 4, is to state the creative concept. Because the chosen medium is an interactive web site, the concept must address things such as look and navigational design that will be developed later. This concept could be a memo for a meeting to pitch to a client for team clarification.

### *Concept*

The first impression of the surfer has to be a combination of intrigue and efficiency. Something has to catch the eye, but then immediately engage the brain. The layout of the home page has to present clear options. There should be a discrete Flash movie that keeps interest without being distracting. The visual metaphor could be a quill pen morphing into a fountain pen, a typewriter, a computer, or a handheld PDA. A clean sidebar should list the major navigational links: Bookstore, Tutoring,

Personal Profile, Script Samples, Writing Links, Email, and Login/Logout. There should be a hit counter.

Sidebars with headings are a way of organizing text topics that are related. Mouse-overs cue submenus, and subtopics can be set in a different color and become hypertext. Body text should be in sans serif type, which generally reads better on the web.

The objective of the site is to generate inquiries and sell consulting Services and writing instruction.

We want to see a clean, sober easy-to-read site that presents an uncluttered spectrum of writing services both to the client needing a writer or consultation and to the writer needing information, advice, or writers' goods. If there is Flash animation it has to be clean and simple. It has to be functional. It has to be fresh in content.

## Instructional and Utilitarian Programs

Interactive media apart from web sites serve most of the main needs of corporations. These include PR/marketing, catalogues, brochures, product manuals and training. What used to be print media can now be interactive catalogues on websites. What used to be print brochures can now be interactive CDs or DVDs. What used to be a linear video solution to corporate communication is often now an interactive CD that may include video clips and much more besides. So much linear program content for corporate use involves a transfer of information to the audience. Audiences have difficulty following, absorbing and retaining a lot of factual detail. Traditional linear video works best as a way to motivate by dramatizing or documenting corporate stories and presenting corporate personalities. Video works well in management groups and large motivational meetings at which an audience has a viewing experience as a group. In contrast, interactive media rarely involve a group experience, even across a network, because interactive responses are, by definition, individual.

Whenever the corporate communication problem involves information transfer, complex data, or training, the intelligent solution must be interactive. The limitation on fixed media is the degree to which the information is volatile and needs frequent updates. Web sites on intranets work better for this because the cost of site maintenance is lower than manufacturing CDs or DVDs. Understanding these issues enables a writer to think critically and creatively in interactive media and do the meta-writing into which the writing of frames and blocks will fit.

## Interactive Catalogues and Brochures

One of the best uses of interactive media in business involves a fundamental need to list large amounts of information about products, which were formerly exclusively

available in print form. Now a catalogue can be a searchable data base with pictures and web links either on a web site or on fixed media. Typically, web sites of business that have a large inventory are well served by an online catalogue which is enhanced by being interactive, even if it is not directly linked to e-commerce and a shopping cart check out, which it often is. Then there is B2B inventory with added functions of online ordering and invoicing.

Print brochures had, and still have, the function of presenting essential information about a company, a service, or a product. Although you can print expensive glossy brochures, you cannot know whether they are read. An interactive brochure allows user selection and allows readers to select the informational depth that matches their interest. Consequently, corporations can create denser brochures without the risk of overloading the audience, which might happen with a print brochure expounding information in a linear fashion.

## Education and Training

In a previous chapter, we noted how enormous the need for training is in the corporate world, in government, and in the military—how to fire an anti-tank missile, how to service a jet engine to FAA standards, how to invest in stocks and shares, how to bake bread, or how to speak French. Interactive media lend themselves very effectively to the learning process. There are several advantages. The learner sees pictures, hears audio, and reads text. Ideas are reinforced by multiple sensory inputs. Many studies show that learning and retention improves with visual intake. In addition, the learner has to interact with the program by thinking, choosing, and applying incremental blocks of knowledge. The learner can pace the process to suit an individual rate of assimilation, repeating where necessary. Most interactive learning programs test and track performance on the host computer or on a server. Training problems also cry out for interactive solutions although there is still some life in the old-fashioned training video. Interactive design for training tends to lean on the use of branching and hierarchies although testing and learning games can be very effective components. Testing enhances interactivity by giving the user a role beyond a page turner. Basic interactivity is just a menu and links, which can be created with Adobe Acrobat or PowerPoint.

Interactive learning programs can be set up on web sites as well. In the educational environment, there are systems such as WebCT and Blackboard which allow asynchronous delivery of course content and on line drop boxes, white boards and chat rooms, and testing. Macromedia Breeze extends the spectrum of functions to include real time video conferencing and desktop sharing as well as presentations and tests that can be downloaded. The possibility of web-based learning and web-based testing facilitate corporate training needs, continuing education, as well as traditional academic learning. Students are able to take the test in their own time by a certain date by logging onto a certain web site. Likewise, corporate training, which is a huge problem for companies that constantly need to train new hires and upgrade

the knowledge of existing personnel, can run interactive training from a centralized web site and serve an international, or nationally-dispersed, population of workers. In many businesses, licensing of brokers or laws governing an industry entail compliance that is a legal responsibility. To create these learning programs, writers are going to be increasingly in demand. Someone who can combine media writing skills with instructional design and training will have a very strong combination for future employment.

## Kiosks

Most people have had the experience of needing to search a small database of information at a location such as a shopping mall. You might want to know what stores are in the mall, or find out where a store is in a large mall. I was on a university campus, which had addressed a fundamental communication problem of direction on campus by using an interactive touch screen kiosk to guide students and visitors to faculty offices, classroom locations and campus buildings. The kiosk application works well for cruise ships, theme parks, museums, malls and department stores. Most kiosks rely on touch screen interactivity.

## Conclusion

The video production economic model, which charges for time and creative services, doesn't apply well when the product is really software or code or something you do with a product. The software developer spends a large amount up front in development and debugging and then shrink wraps boxed copies that sell in increasing numbers and get upgraded and provide a revenue stream. The other model is the advertising agency that has an account and can develop campaigns, brand awareness, and charge a retainer plus commission on media buys. None of these models exactly fits non-linear production businesses which, in effect, combine all three. However, some companies like Planet Interactive in Boston see no problem in charging for the time of highly skilled creative people, including writers, marking it up and billing a client, just like traditional video production companies.

The most important idea to carry forward to the next chapter makes the distinction between a certain kind of writing for content and what we now call meta-writing, which addresses site functional objectives, visual design, and navigation. This writing requires thinking through all the communication problems and thinking across parts to grasp the whole. This is true for all interactive media, but the web site has evolved in a short time span to serve critical communication needs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Web sites will extend their own functionality and importance because of accessibility via portable wireless devices such as Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) and cell phones. These new input and output devices will be leveraged to provide more services and enable buyer response to advertising; for example,

web sites that allow you to book a table at a restaurant from your cell phone. Voice recognition and smaller phones will change the traffic and function of the device which was originally engineered just to enable wireless access to the voice network. Voice recognition means that functions that now depend on keyboards and text input will function by voice commands like in Star Trek and other science fiction worlds. Voice recognition is already being used in customer service voice menus.

We have laid down some foundations for interactive writing for the web. Apart from the need to consult more specialized works, if you want to develop your writing in this area, you will need to stay in touch with developing trends and techniques as the internet continues to evolve. It seems clear that writing for interactive media, particularly for web sites, is going to evolve rapidly, perhaps more rapidly in the next ten years than over its first ten.

## Exercises

1. Compare three web portals such as Yahoo!, Netscape, MSN and analyze the functionality of the sites.
2. Compare some major corporate web sites such as Nike, IBM, or Hewlett-Packard with the your college's or university's web site.
3. Invent an interactive kiosk for a ski resort, or a national park, or a tourist guide for your area.
4. Write an interactive training proposal for how to apply to college, how to make salads, or how to use your campus library.
5. Pick a familiar product and write an interactive manual of instruction for it.
6. Write a high level design document for a web site or a CD-ROM on mountain biking, in-line skating, or any other sport or leisure activity of your choice.
7. Write and flowchart an interactive kiosk guide to your local museum or shopping mall.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>This breakthrough idea came from Tim Berners-Lee, who is still involved in the transnational committees that establish protocol for the continued functioning of the web.

<sup>2</sup>See <http://www.nike.com> and <http://www.redbull.com>

<sup>3</sup>Interestingly the OECD argues in its published standard for web communication that there should be "a text equivalent for every non-text element." See <http://www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT/full-checklist.html> 1.1.

## Writing for Interactive Entertainment

# 15

The last chapter explored writing for interactive media that basically serve a utilitarian, commercial or informational objective. This chapter looks at writing for interactive media that are primarily designed to divert, amuse, or entertain an audience. The media discussed in the last chapter usually have some corporate or organizational function. The kind of media we want to consider here generally offer an experience for which the audience is prepared to pay and which satisfies a need for knowledge or entertainment, or both.

### Interactive Reference Works

Although we have had dictionaries ever since the 18<sup>th</sup> Century when Dr. Johnson put together a dictionary of the English language, and later encyclopedias and other reference works in book form, the emergence of interactive media on CD-ROM offered an increase in the versatility of interactive referencing. Although cross-referencing was always part of the concept in print, the multiplicity of the links and the speed of linking in CD-ROMs enhances the user's experience. In addition, the old concept of the illustrated encyclopedia could be expanded to include not only more still pictures in color but video clips, audio clips, and graphic animations. Reference works such as encyclopedias were quick to see how they could enrich the content by introducing stills (already part of the print editions), video and audio with links to make searching and cross-referencing more dynamic. Grolier's Encyclopedia and Microsoft Encarta are now given away as part of the software packages in new computers. They are maps to giant web sites that can be updated continually.

The primary interactive structure would seem to be more or less dictated by the traditional alphabetical listing. Hypertext and other links thread new instant interactivity through the content by topic or theme. Seeing video of President Kennedy's inaugural speech, hearing the voice of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, seeing a 3-D graphic of some part of the human anatomy, transforms

hypertext cross referencing into multimedia interactivity. Medical, legal, and other technical references works on CD make knowledge more accessible. Databases and search engines online make information available that would otherwise be inaccessible, but more to the point, they enable the processing of statistical data from commerce and government in ways that would defy research in the days before the invention of computers. With the invention of the personal computer all those capabilities are within the reach of the individual.

## E-Commerce and Interactive Books

Although the first interactive media were reference works, there were also early attempts to make interactive entertainment. The best-selling CD-ROM for many years was *Virtual Valerie*, an interactive strip tease, which allowed the user to tell Valerie, the stripper character, what to do. Porn always seems to drive new media, whether it was the belly dancer in George Eastman's demonstration of moving picture at the Chicago Exhibition in 1895 or the pornography that drove the consumer VHS format to triumph over Sony's superior Betamax format, not to mention the early dominance of porn web sites. Online pornography has pioneered the techniques of e-commerce because it fits, accidentally, the ideal business model for e-commerce. In that model, you can shop, choose, sample, pay for and have delivered directly to your desktop the data, goods, or service that you seek. Amazon.com, on the other hand, is still warehousing books and videos and physically shipping them to the customer, as are most other web-based extensions of mail-order businesses. The true e-businesses actually delivers goods and services and take payment over the internet. Banking and online stock-trading fit the criteria. Another business that leads the way is software. You can buy and download software directly to your hard drive, or you can use it on a remote server. Why should you buy highly marked-up, shrink-wrapped packages of CDs or software that has to be manufactured, warehoused, shipped and displayed on shelves in expensive retail floor space that you have to travel to, park near, and spend time getting to, when you can get the software directly from a web site?

Just as the music and film industries have been thrown into confusion by the rapid evolution of media compression technology (including MP3s and DivX movies), combined with high-speed internet access, so the publishing business is also bound to change. Books and music cannot only be sold over the Internet, they can be distributed over the Internet. The major media companies have been slow on the uptake. Authors can now self-publish on the web. Stephen King experimented with publishing a serial novel on the web.<sup>1</sup> Books on web sites could become more interactive and could be sold as incremental chapters or selections, much like music tracks can be sold individually rather than as albums. This book could be fully interactive on the DVD that comes with it. It could be made more interactive, integrating the text and the DVD, and be posted on a web site and consulted on an



hourly basis, or sold chapter by chapter, or by subscription. No doubt traditional writers will have to rethink how they write when the market for their product is an interactive marketplace. Fiction has enormous interactive possibilities. Perhaps games and storytelling will converge in a way that we cannot now predict. Lastly, video games can be played on the web, joining the circle of e-commerce innovation. Multi-user Domains (MUDs) and Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) enable global game-playing between players logged on to a website.

## Games, Narrative, and Entertainment

### *Video Games*

In the early 1990s, a number of educational games combining play and learning came out. I bought *Maths Blaster* and *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?* for my son to make learning more fun. Play is a profound need of human nature. Children's play is a form of learning, and computers enable us to engage the natural propensity for play in the cause of learning to add or subtract fractions or learn geography. Interactive entertainment is a natural outcome of the marriage of computers, graphics and video, and it is consistent with the interactive structure of the Web. Computer graphics can now create any world, any fantasy, any morphology that you can imagine. The interactive game market, whether distributed on CD-ROM, DVD, or posted to a web site, reaches a huge market. Although the demographic is primarily under thirty (the average age is twenty-nine and rising), that demographic is probably changing as the gamers mature (seventeen percent are over fifty). Video gaming is international or transnational. Gaming competitions, supported by corporate promotional money, have produced gaming professionals who make a living playing video games. We are looking at a growth industry. Cell phones now link to the web and are able to download games and video and act as portable game consoles. Universal portable handheld devices on which all networked communications are accessible are the trend of the future.

Video games are now big business. The Writer's Guild of America web site says that this is "an enormous and continually evolving area of entertainment that now rivals feature films in terms of profits and popularity. Video games have become one of the three major forms of screen-based entertainment, alongside motion pictures and TV."<sup>2</sup> Some recent statistics in an article in *The Boston Globe Magazine* put the figure at \$9.9 billion for video games, software and hardware, and another \$1 billion for PC games.<sup>3</sup> However, the Writers Guild of America web site mentions \$15 billion as an estimate of the size of the industry. Video game developers bid millions for video game rights to movie properties, and it can cost millions to develop a video game. Development budgets are starting to rival feature film dollars. Games can easily cost \$500,000 to produce at the low end and a record \$40 million



at the high end. Although most of that is spent on programming and sometimes elaborate 3-D animation, some money has to be spent on writing.

In the beginning, video games were an arcade novelty like Pong, which came out in 1972, or Pac-Man, which soon followed. They were software or programming creations without need of a script or story. We can draw a parallel to the early days of movies, which also began as coin-operated arcade entertainment. Soon the moving picture novelty embraced more ambitious storytelling. At that point you couldn't run out into the woods with a camera and a bunch of actors and make up a story as you went along. In the first place, it would not produce a good result. Second, it would be a very expensive way of producing film. So as video game development budgets climb into the millions, the need for preproduction, creative storymapping and planning becomes indispensable. Just as the scriptwriter became the key creator in movie preproduction, writing promises to become a key instrument to construct, imagine, and design a complex game. A video game has to have all the things that writers are good at creating—characters, plot, and dialogue. A game that has characters and dialogue needs a writer to invent the characters, create a storyline, and write their dialogue.

Exactly how writers are employed and what kind of writing they do varies a great deal depending on the producers and developers of games. The Writers' Guild of Great Britain web site indicates that "some writers are being asked to write dialogue for characters and animation that have already been put together. Writing the script for a game can be the very last part of the process."<sup>4</sup> A similar observation can be found on the website of the International Game Developers Association, which has a special interest group for writers. The Association published a white paper, "IGDA's Guide to Writing for Games," in November 2003. In it, they discuss the cross-over between writer and designer that we addressed in Chapter 13. One person can do both, but increasingly, higher budgets and more complex game design will create opportunities for writers. Today, few writers make a living writing only for games, but that time is likely to come. Meanwhile, the white paper identifies two main writing skills that are particular to video games: narrative design (creating a story) and interactive dialogue scripting. The role of writers is not standardized as it is in the film and television industry. Indeed, "the role of the game writer remains ill-defined and poorly understood." At the same time, the authors of this document, who are all professional game developers, believe that the medium has to "mature and broaden its potential audience." They see the need for "new material and new ideas" and they think the "game writer will have an important role to play in facilitating this evolution."<sup>5</sup>

The locus of the writer in the process also varies from one developer to another. Sometimes writers are called in relatively late to create or polish dialogue, especially when the game has originated in another country and another language and needs what is essentially a foreign version for the local market. A significant writing task involves writing the game bible, with descriptions of characters, for a large development team to work on. Also every game comes in a box with significant text



describing settings and worlds, game objectives and with a more detailed instruction booklet that the player will read. As with films and television, there are two basic ways to originate a game. Either you create it from scratch, or you buy a license to create a game out of source material such as a movie, a comic, or a book. This adaptation process depends on a unique writer's skills. Behind every game is some kind of written proposal and some kind of script. So where there are video games, there must be writers.

Writers work on project pitches, intellectual property development, narrative design, world building, dialogue scripting and dialogue engine design. A project pitch is not going to differ a lot from concepts in the traditional linear media, except that it has to be thought out in terms of interactive values and appeal. It will necessitate composing something like a log line or a premise—a brief and provocative statement that tells us what the game is about. Let us remind ourselves of the concept of meta-writing again. The writing is not in the words so much as the thinking and conceptualizing behind the words. That is where the specialized knowledge and understanding of interactivity and gaming will enable someone to write for this industry. According to the IGDA's white paper, "Game writers need to be game-literate, which is to say, they must understand how games function." Clearly there is a vocabulary and a jargon that the industry uses and understands that sets it apart.

Games are defined in terms of the point of view and the type of game. The point of view also has implications for the structure and design of the interactivity. The first-person game presents a subjective reality type of experience, with the real-life player seeing and hearing what the player character sees and hears. An example would be *HalfLife*, produced by Valve Software and distributed by Sierra. Flight simulators also tend to follow that model for obvious reasons. Then there is a third person or objective narrative, somewhat like the omniscient narrator of the novelist. An example would be *Tomb Raider*. You see Lara Croft as a character, but she only makes the moves you decide and input via a player console. The third kind is the platform game. In this, the character is seen by a camera. The camera can pan and track showing the player all points of view including maps of position. The player can switch between angles and viewpoints, and do inventory of weapons or energy. An example would be the PlayStation game, *Metal Gear Solid*.

Then there are simulation games such as *SimCity* and *Civilization* that have apparently limitless combinations that occur following your choices of different scenarios. If you build roads or public transport in *SimCity*, you could run out of funds and have to raise taxes or deal with an economic crisis. Every choice has huge numbers of permutations and combinations with unpredictable results. So it seems that every game you play is unique compared to challenge games like *Tomb Raider* in which you have to progress by scoring and by problem-solving strategies that you can learn and repeat. There is even a game that allows you to simulate running a university. Simulation games seem to be very reliant on strong navigation and design work.

Games have developed a terminology or jargon which describes the type of game and the point of view:

- **Platform Game:** involves jumping on platforms of various sizes and jumping on enemies to destroy them. Examples include Super Mario Bros. (NES), Sonic the Hedgehog (Genesis), and Jak and Daxter (PS2).
- **RPG:** (role-playing game) A genre of game for both PCs and consoles in which the player develops intelligence and skills by collecting points and solving puzzles.
- **Platform:** The type of system a game is played on such as PlayStation 2, Xbox, Game Boy and GameCube.
- **Flight simulator:** simulates the action of flying an aircraft. Realistic controls make the flying itself the point of the game. Driving simulators do the same thing for car racing.
- **Shooter:** A game in which the object is to kill an enemy with a weapon that fires bullets or rays while avoiding being shot by the adversaries. Such games are usually constructed in a 3-D environment, assume a first-person perspective and are referred to as FPS or “first-person shooters.”

Then there is a defining question of the point of view that the player enjoys:

- **First-Person:** You see the action through the eyes of your characters. You don't see your own body.
- **Third-Person:** An omniscient point of view that lets you see the character you are controlling in contrast to first person.
- **Isometric view:** A view of a game and its action from an angle instead of directly from above or directly from the side.

Some other terms that help define video games are:

- **Cut-Scenes:** live or computer-generated videos clips, usually not interactive, interludes between stages that furnish additional information, such as story elements, tips, tricks or secrets.
- **Avatar:** the character that you control in the game or that you create in a multiplayer game.
- **AI (artificial intelligence):** The programmed characteristics of behavior and response of a non-human character. All characters not controlled by the player have some form of AI.
- **HUD (heads up display):** Used most in first person games, the heads up display, like a flight deck or a dashboard, presents information on the screen, such as the life meter, level, weapons, ammunition, map, etc.
- **Engine:** the application that powers a game. One primary engine (the graphics engine) and several smaller engines power AI and sound.

People refer to the whole product as the engine, meaning “the computer code that is programmable and usually proprietary to a platform or publisher.”<sup>6</sup>

Characters in interactive media have to be developed differently. They may have back stories as characters in linear media do, but they behave differently and are unique to an environment. Lara Croft in the early Tomb Raider games can only walk, jump, climb, shoot and react in terms of the script for the environment and her given weapons and responses. In Rockstar’s game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, the third person character that the player controls has to be fed to maintain his energy. If you over feed him, he gets fat and can’t run fast. So you can have him work out and build strength. There is also the relationship to the player. Is there interaction with the player or just with other characters, or with environment, or with robots or other non-human characters? How will communication take place? What actions are scripted for the character? What dialogue supports the game? How will change of strength, health and energy level affect the character and be impacted by scenarios that are imagined for encounters with other characters or environments?

We have already established that writing for interactive media is different. Writing interactive entertainment can be exceedingly challenging. It is difficult to represent multiple choice and alternate scenarios that result from user choice. What changes from linear media plots is that the writer has to create player choice. In a sense the player becomes a character.

Dialogue is an important component of linear narrative and game narrative. However, the way dialogue functions in games is different. First, it might appear as text. It may be a narrow range of responses to specific questions of situations. The character may not develop and can be affected by the environment rather than the plot or interaction with another character. Although dialogue has to fit character, it has an altered functionality in games. It may present choice to the player with critical consequences for the outcome of the game. Dialogue may be voice-over or text as opposed to lip-sync delivery by an actor with body language to go with it. You lose actors and acting.

Writers are called on to develop game ideas from intellectual property of a non-game source such as a movie or a book. Although this is a form of adaptation, it bears little relationship to writing a movie script based on a book or a play. The game writer has to translate a story into interactive choice and play that keeps the spirit and style of the source but creates a wholly new experience and even extends the story and perhaps develops fuller minor characters in the game. *The Matrix* movies furnish a good example because the success of the movies generated games that extend the world of the matrix. In the MMORPG, you can create a character and teach it skills to navigate the world of the matrix after the third and last episode of the movie.

This brings us to the most complex and demanding form of writing for games, which is narrative design. Design implies some understanding of programming,



or at least what it is capable of doing. It requires imagining the style and scope of the game, often within the framework of narrative set by the game developer. Its nearest relative in the linear entertainment world is the treatment. Whereas the treatment in film or television comes early on in story development, narrative design may occur in tandem with, or parallel to, the game design of the developer. If writers assume a stronger role, by grace or by choice, in the process of game development, perhaps the writing of narrative design will become stronger. It goes back to the question we have raised elsewhere—whether the writer designs or the designer writes.

World building involves writing that imagines and describes the world or environment that the player experiences in the world of the game, what it looks like graphically, what kind of laws govern its physical and psychic space, what kind of creatures or behaviors are part of that world. These determine colors, the sounds, and the style or look of the game. It seems that, once again, this can happen after the basic game design is already in place. It fleshes out the game environment.

My perception is that, in contrast to the linear entertainment world, writing for games might involve a stable of writers, who might have differentiated, specialized writing skills. One writer might be able to do all the types of writing, but my hunch is that there will be specialization. Script writing breaks down into three types, according to a producer at Planet Interactive in Boston. There is script writing for text that appears on screen; there is script writing for video segments or modules that run as quicktime movies or 3-D animation; there is script writing for voice narrative. Sometimes this can involve three different writers. Sometimes, a writer has the skills for all three. A fourth type would be the conceptual writing, the meta-writing of the narrative design.

Another area of concern would be researching the background so that dialogue is consistent with the world that prevails in the game. Just as TV series have a series bible, so the video game needs a game bible, which details all the back story of the game and its characters and defines the objectives and the outcomes for the player. Its first function is to provide the production team with a common body of knowledge so that consistency of style and story is maintained. This would give rise to the booklet that is normally delivered with a game to prime the player/purchaser in order to get started. There is a clear writing job to be done here.

Some idea of the writing can be gleaned from the pro forma contracts for game writing and interactive writing that are obtainable on the website of the Writer's Guild.<sup>7</sup> Although the writers who would seem to be closest in background and talent would be the movie and TV script writer, there would have to be a radical shift in mind set to deal with the non-linear nature of composition. It is analogous to the early days of screenwriting when the writers were either novelists or playwrights, often with little understanding of the new medium. Gradually, a kind of writer would emerge that could see the particular writing problem of the medium, and would do the meta-writing that would lead to strong program content.



## Graphics vs. Live Action

A game could be created with computer graphics or live-action video. Take, for example, the PlayStation game, *Metal Gear Solid*. This game world is created purely out of computer graphics. It is a challenge adventure that requires the player to infiltrate a military base for disarming nuclear war heads in Alaska that has been overrun by terrorists, find out if they have the capacity to launch a nuclear strike, prevent a nuclear launch at all costs, and rescue two high-level hostages, one military and one the president of Arms Tech. This game, like many others, has evolved over more than a decade. There is a complete game bible. The game introduces you to the characters, who are played by voice actors. The player has an inventory of weapons and rations. There is a bank of clues to call on when the player gets stuck.

The majority of games are created on a computer with 2-D or 3-D graphics tools. Not many are produced with photographic backgrounds and live-action sequences. There are practical reasons for this. Actors and video production are expensive, but you don't have to pay computer graphic characters for their performance. You merely have to record their voices. Audio production is less expensive. Video requires a huge amount of bandwidth, or it has to be severely compressed. Most of the worlds of computer games are extravagant fantasy worlds in space with aliens or in mythical kingdoms with monsters. It is easier and probably cheaper to create those environments and their characters with computer graphics tools than with live action video. The animation occupies less drive space than full motion video. With graphics and animation, you can create whatever you can imagine.

## The Order of Writing

Broadly speaking, video games face similar production problems to video, film and television. You have to start with an idea. That seed idea has to be a written concept of the content and style of the game and how it will look and play. It then has to be elaborated in a treatment or design document that articulates the vision for a larger production team. As with film and video, content has to be created except that production involves huge amounts of graphic design and programming as well as audio recording of dialogue sound effects, and music. Video editing roughly corresponds to programming and debugging. However, the relation of writing to linear production inevitably differs from interactive production.

Electronic Arts, the world's leading independent developer and publisher of interactive entertainment software, outlines the video game production process on their web site. The writing phase is somewhat concealed in their description of a design document "that specifies gameplay, fiction, characters, and levels."<sup>8</sup>



In pre-production, artists and software developers work up a prototype 2-D and 3-D design, animation and programming from the design document. Production assistants then breakdown and prioritize the tasks to create the finished product. Teams of artists and animators are coordinated as they create the assets that are the visual experience of the game. Likewise, teams of software engineers write the code with game authoring tools that create the interactivity. As with all interactive media production, there is a chicken and egg situation near the beginning in which developers have to toggle between creating interactive play choices and then translating that into visual assets that are needed, whether video, audio, or graphics, to fulfill the vision. The scriptlet for some dialogue or a storyboard for an animation sequence could be written in response to the evolving game. The chicken and egg situation in which you are working from a written concept that becomes modified in production then leads to renewed writing and or design. This is not true of film and video. Production proceeds from a finished script and its breakdown into a shooting schedule.

To summarize, the probable sequence of game development follows these steps:

- Concept Proposal (writing)
- Pre-production (design, writing story, characters, levels, gameplay)
- Prototyping (continued writing as design evolves)
- Full Production (continues writing as design evolves + scripting for software engineering)
- Post production (alpha, beta and final testing + marketing and promotion)

Writing and rewriting for video games is not confined to one stage.<sup>9</sup> Conceptual writing that imagines the game play and design is meta-writing, whereas dialogue and character description is content writing. The conceptual writing at the early stage should contain a short premise, describe the type of game play, and outline a map of the game story, challenge, or goal. It should describe the look and style of the world of the game.<sup>10</sup> As production begins, the sequence of writing and its relationship to production is harder to pin down and seems to vary with the developer and the way the production team is structured. It seems safe to say that the dialogue writing for characters and the cut-scenes could arise after considerable game design but necessarily before production of the assets (picture and sound). You cannot write dialogue for stages of the play until you know the game design and the kind of choices that the player has, which trigger alternate responses.

## Formats

We have not tackled the thorny question of a format for this writing. Unlike with other media, we have discussed, we cannot be final and definitive: “Game writing

has no real corollary in mainstream entertainment. Books, movies, television, theater - they all involve the creation of specific documents with established formats, which the interactive industry does not have."<sup>11</sup> There are some emerging patterns, dictated by logic and need. The Appendix shows one example from the Movie Magic Screenwriter templates.

An example of dialogue writing for a kung-fu style game called Seven Shades illustrates one approach.<sup>12</sup>

```

Fox.Known is set TRUE if Xia Tu has learnt that Zhapian Hu is a fox spirit and
not a human being.
Bandits.Wuhan is set TRUE if the bandits lead by Shao Lung are currently hiding
in the Wuhan marshes. If not, they have no fixed base of operations at this time
in the script.
AREA: Kongmoon
SCENE: Mansion
// The upper floor of FOX's mansion; plushly furnished. HARE enters through
the window, looking around furtively. She moves forward, looking for any sign of
habitation. FOX opens the shutters to a lantern, illuminating the room, and
casting HARE's shadow against the wall.
FOX: It seems impatient to steal from a Nobleman's estate without waiting for
the master of the house to be absent.
HARE: Forgive me; I meant no disrespect. I bring a message of vital importance
to the safety of Kongmoon.
FOX: Messengers come by doors. Thieves come by windows.
HARE: And thieves who bring messages?
FOX (amused): So you admit that you are a thief?
CONDITION: if Fox.Known
{
HARE (pointedly): An honourable thief would do so, I would hope.
FOX: Can there be honour among those who steal?
HARE: Those who steal treasures? Assuredly. We shall see about those who steal
cities.
FOX (amused): You are remarkably well informed for a common thief.
HARE: There is nothing common about anyone in this room, fox spirit.
}
ELSE
{
HARE: It would be dishonourable to do otherwise.
FOX: That must make it difficult to avoid justice.
HARE: Have you not heard? There is no justice in Honan.
}
FOX (somewhat surprised; then moving the conversation forward): Indeed? You
said you brought a message.

```

HARE: Huang Leng plans to march upon Kongmoon and bend it to his will. He is ruthless, and intent on procuring not only the throne, but dominion over the entire middle kingdom. Already his agents are within the walls of the city, seeking a way to subdue your defences.

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As you can see, the dialogue has to relate to another kind of document, which is a design document, in order to make sense because of player choice that is the essence of any game. As you look through the examples of design documents, you find diversity. However, something has to be written down at the beginning. Something very elaborate mapping out of the production is indispensable to production but may be modified as graphic artists develop scenes and programmers code play. Dialogue for the sound track and for cut-scenes must be written to keep pace with the evolving game and precede the creation of those assets.

## Interactive Television

You might have noticed that a number of programs on television run a subtitle with a web page address that extends or continues the content of the program. The Public Broadcasting System channels seem to be the most evolved. WGBH in Boston produces *Frontline*, a current affairs documentary program, which has a very complete web site with transcripts and background material. During many documentary and current affairs programs, a web site URL is periodically superimposed as a subtitle. If you are online, during or after the program you can explore in-depth interviews and out-takes that are not in the edited broadcast footage. There are associated chat rooms and forums for audience participation in discussion about the content. Most network news programs have web site links posted on screen so that other levels of information and background can be consulted online while viewing the program. Television sets can also be linked via broadband cable to the web and serve as monitors for browsing. The program URLs can then become active links. A few television series, such as *CSI* and *The Practice* have created websites that extend the story and create enhanced experiences for the audience.

I have also seen a Saturday night movie program, which holds audience attention by running a quiz and interactive exchange on a web site posted on the program and announced by an anchor before commercials so that audiences will stay with the program by going to the web site and playing to win prizes. There are also web sites that sell products in the program. This is only going to increase because as cable and internet converge, the same monitor can display both. Product placement, which has become an important part of film and television financing, enables interactivity to grow audience responses beyond mere recognition and selling to actually buying what they see. The ideal marketing technology will enable the viewer to click on

the object in the picture and be linked to a website to buy the article. One wonders how this will change writing and conceiving program content.

As the phenomenon of convergence continues with broadband access to cable and the Internet, we are likely to find more widespread adoption of devices that have polyvalent uses for both media. Some manufacturers are selling television sets that can be connected to the Internet by means of a modem. Computers can display television broadcasts and tune into netcast programs of cable and radio. HDTV monitors that will display high definition programming are readily available, which means that digital television and internet can be delivered through the same fiber to the household. This potential has hardly been exploited to date in terms of cross-collateralizing cable, TV and internet. The question for writers, producers, and directors is how this will impact the concept of programming. Viewer response or even viewer choice of program outcomes could become a feature of next-generation entertainment.

At the moment, most television programs and most movies have web pages that enrich the audience interaction with the program content. Remember that the moving picture medium began as a silent medium. Writers and producers did not think in terms of sound. When sound was introduced, whole new ways of imagining and writing scripts must have opened up opportunities for those who could exploit the new dimension. The potential of interactive movies is technically feasible with DVD technology and DVD authoring software. The same will be true for cable television. Nevertheless, the kind of story that can be made interactive is limited to a certain type. There is a potential convergence between video games and television.

Personally, I don't like the idea of interactive television because I am comfortable with the existing format. However, there are already signs of narrative innovation in the series *Once and Again*, which was mentioned in Chapter 12. The cutaway technique to the black-and-white asides that allow characters to communicate inner thoughts to the audience suggests an interactive potential with different writing and production so that an audience could choose to hear an inner thought or back story at any given moment. I see interactivity developing in this way so that audiences can select deeper levels of back story or character information rather than audiences choosing story outcomes.

The possibilities with documentary programming and game shows are not hard to imagine. Documentary could easily escape the restrictions of linear editing by presenting out-takes, background interviews, text, and interactive chat rooms not much different from the current PBS practice. Game and quiz shows could easily add an interactive dimension from the viewer audience. In 2000 a new series, *Survivor*, captured the ratings, pushing out the popular *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* The format of the show requires the "survivors" to vote one of their number "off the island" each week and become thereby ineligible to win the million-dollar prize. It is easy to imagine the audience being asked to vote online and interact with the program in real time as the cast of survivors presents themselves to the mass audience voters.

## Interactive Movies

A few producers are already experimenting with interactive drama in which the viewer response affects the outcome. At the National Association of Broadcasters annual convention, several years ago, I attended a panel on interactive entertainment that featured some of these pioneers. A movie theater in New Jersey was built to allow the audience to interact with the storyline and select different story outcomes, which depended on majority vote by means of some control buttons at every seat. The panelist reported that the experience was addictive and that people kept buying new tickets to the movie to explore the alternative plot outcomes. I have never found this kind of entertainment in any neighborhood near me. This may change. However, I think there are inherent limitations quite apart from the capital cost of equipping cinemas with wiring and individual seat controls to input into the program. It also requires a digital cinema.

The likely method of distribution for feature film entertainment in the future will probably be digital, across a network or by satellite to the exhibition theater to avoid the cost of heavy film prints that have to be shipped and stored and which wear out. Although digital projection does not yet equal film projection in quality for size of image, the changeover seems inevitable. If the movie is therefore in electronic form, it will be much easier to embed interactive choices in the program. Nevertheless, theaters would have to be modified to furnish interactive controls to the audience. That system of controls would have to enjoy universality for producers to create product for it. Looked at another way, a successful story usually compels viewer attention because it seems inevitable and true. The audience believes in the story and the characters such that alternatives do not even occur to us. That is the nature of great writing. Maybe there is an alternative *Hamlet* in which he doesn't kill Polonius and, with the help of his only friend Horatio, organizes a palace coup, takes back the throne, and marries Ophelia. Great stories and great characters are so because they reflect some kind of emotional truth about human experience. Conventional movies have a long life ahead of them even while interactive novelty may begin to appear. Stories with multiple outcome choice will have to be restricted in scope and choice. The model is akin to a video game. That kind of experience is satisfied in video games. Television appears to be the more likely candidate for interactive story telling. It is going to become digital and can be married to a computer in the home. In the near future, interactivity could be coupled with on-demand digital television.

## Conclusion

Writing for interactive media is no doubt the fastest growing opportunity for new writers. It is also the most elusive because of the newness of the field. Clearly, video games are overtaking movies and television in dollar terms. The situation of writers

is somewhat like that of writers at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the early days of the movies. Nobody knew exactly what a scriptwriter was, but the need for pre-production writing quickly emerged. As we noted in Chapter 1, novelists, dramatists and even journalists turned to the new kind of writing required by the first visual medium. The difference now is that we have had a century of films, television, and video script writing that, although linear in content, is not so far removed from non-linear interactive content. The formats have yet to be firmly established, but the need for them clearly exists. Fortunately, those who want to develop their writing for interactive media further can turn to a growing list of specialized titles dedicated to this kind of writing listed in the bibliography in the Appendix.

## Exercises

1. Write a concept for an interactive quiz show.
2. Write a concept, then a design document and a flowchart for a simple video game based on animation.
3. Look at your favorite video game and write a design document for it so that a game developer from another planet could recreate the game.
4. Using Inspiration or Storyvision, construct a flowchart for the game in Exercise 3.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>*The Plant* (2000) is now off line. [http://www.stephenking.com/index\\_flash.php](http://www.stephenking.com/index_flash.php)

<sup>2</sup>The WGA has established a *pro forma* contract for this kind of writing and formed a New Media Writers Caucus in 2004. See <http://www.wga.org/>.

<sup>3</sup>Tracy Mayor, "What Are Video Games Turning Us Into?" *The Boston Globe Magazine*, February 20, 2005.

<sup>4</sup><http://www.writersguild.org.uk/News/index.php?ArtID=14>

<sup>5</sup><http://www.igda.org/writing/>

<sup>6</sup>See [http://jobs.ea.com/how\\_ea\\_makes\\_games.html](http://jobs.ea.com/how_ea_makes_games.html); Mark S. Meadows, *Pause & Effect: The Art of Interactive Narrative*, New Riders Press, Indianapolis, Indiana, 2002.

<sup>7</sup>See [http://www.wga.org/subpage\\_writersresources.aspx?id=90](http://www.wga.org/subpage_writersresources.aspx?id=90)

<sup>8</sup>See <http://www.igda.org/writing/WritersGlossary.htm> for another useful glossary of gaming jargon.

<sup>9</sup>See [http://www.erasmatazz.com/library/Le\\_Morte\\_DArthur/Index.html](http://www.erasmatazz.com/library/Le_Morte_DArthur/Index.html) for a rich documentation of written development of ideas for a game.

<sup>10</sup>See <http://www.ihobo.com/archive/index2.shtml> for an archive containing well thought out concepts, elaborated game designs, and scripts. See also

[http://jhorneman.typepad.com/photos/ico\\_gdc\\_2004/dscn5686.html](http://jhorneman.typepad.com/photos/ico_gdc_2004/dscn5686.html)  
for a presentation of the Game design Methods of ICO.

<sup>11</sup>See the article, "How Do You Become a Game Writer?" at <http://www.igda.org/writing/HowDoYouBecomeAGameWriter.htm>.

<sup>12</sup>See [http://www.ihobo.com/archive/scr\\_7shades.shtml](http://www.ihobo.com/archive/scr_7shades.shtml).

# Anticipating Professional Issues

## PART FIVE

Writers hope that there will be an audience for what they write and that they can get paid for their writing. To come full circle, we should remember the opening chapters of the book in which we made the point that scripts are blueprints, instructions to a production team, and that audiences don't generally read scripts. Although writing may begin as a purely creative act, at some point the question arises: What is the value of this writing? If writing is a professional skill, then how much is it worth? What is someone paying you for? What are your obligations?

The answers to these questions can vary according to the market sector in which you choose to practice your craft. Broadly, the writing market divides between the entertainment world and the corporate world. The first is perhaps more glamorous, more competitive, and more highly paid but also a great deal riskier than the second, which is less familiar to most would-be writers. In both worlds, the overwhelming majority of writers are freelance.

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# 16

## You Can Get Paid to Do This

### Writing for the Entertainment World

The writer is indispensable, yet not always valued—at least in the entertainment world. Sam Goldwyn is reported to have called scriptwriters “shmucks with Underwoods.” An Underwood, for those who have no cultural memory about this, is a make of manual typewriter. So you’re a shmuck with a laptop. Robert Altman’s brilliant film *The Player* (1992) gives you an idea of what life as a writer in Hollywood might be like, even though it is edged with satire and more in-jokes about the industry than most outsiders would understand. In the movie, a studio executive makes an interesting statement that goes something like, “My studio accepts twenty thousand submissions a year and puts twelve of them into production.” There are probably no formal statistics to support this, but it sounds reasonably accurate. Multiply that by several studios, and you can estimate the number of screenplay submissions in any given year. Let’s say a hundred thousand as a round number. That’s a lot of competition. Of those, many are bought or optioned, but few are ever actually produced. So income from writing, as I know from personal experience, does not necessarily lead to screen credits. There is no way of knowing how effective or systematic the selection process is. Every time you see a bad movie, you wonder how it got into production. Although people make mistakes in judgment, we have to assume that overall, the best scripts eventually rise to the top. No one intends to make a bad film although many producers make low-budget product for the video market that never gets a theatrical release.

To get ready to earn a living through writing for media, you should read the work of professionals and read books by professionals about the craft and about the business of writing. There is a selected bibliography at the end of this book. There are also a number of web sites dedicated to writing also listed in the bibliography. Above all, you have to have conviction about your writing. It can be a lonely business. Nobody will recognize you until you have produced work that you can show. So persistence is indispensable. It is difficult to give advice on this matter. What would you say to a basketball player or any athlete who has ambitions to

play professionally? You'll never know if you don't try. At some point, you realize that even though you have talent, you are not succeeding. So you go to plan B. Or economic necessity drives you to take up some other activity, perhaps related.<sup>1</sup> These choices are intensely personal in nature.

Script readers and editors need a writing background. Producers who commission writers benefit enormously from having tried to write themselves, as do directors. Financial backers make decisions about large investments based, in part, on scripts. Other opportunities exist in the corporate world where the stakes are not as high. You still get to write professionally while you work on that screenplay. In its own right, the corporate world is a highly creative and stimulating place to work. Every job is different. Although some assignments are less exciting than others, my personal experience writing for corporate media has been rewarding.

## Writing Contracts

If you do get hired to write for compensation, make sure you have a contract. If you have an agent, the agent will negotiate the remuneration and the details of the contract that affect your delivery schedule and responsibilities. In the entertainment world, a number of trade union agreements are in force. The Writers Guild of America (East and West) and the Writers Guild of Great Britain, which have reciprocal agreements, have contract models and minimum payment scales for film, television, and radio. The Writers Guild of America has recently worked out a contract for the newest field of writing—the internet. Even if you are not a member of these guilds, their standards are industry models that are well understood. A signatory studio or producer may not pay less than the minimums set by the unions. The writers guilds in different countries are strongest in the film and television industry. They have virtually no presence or influence in the corporate field. In my experience, however, the market in corporate video seems to reward competent writers adequately without the need for union representation.

As of 2004, the Writers Guild of America minimum for an original screenplay was \$75,443 for films with budgets over \$5million, and \$36,856 for films budgeted between \$1.2 and \$5 million. Successful writers with a track record of box office successes earn ten to twenty times the minimum. A sought-after writer can sell a screenplay for a million dollars and up. Some writers are able to negotiate a profit participation position in the producer's net. Major actors and other talent can negotiate a percentage of the gross, that is, the total revenue collected by the distributor. This is the most desirable position because it is the most transparent and hardest to disguise by creative accounting. The most likely profit participation that a writer can expect is a percentage of the money that the distributor pays to the producer after its commission and expenses are deducted off the top. Whatever revenue comes in after that goes first to the cash investors until their production investment is paid off with interest. If the movie makes a profit, the money is split



*pari passu* (a legal term meaning proportionately to each at each step) according to the original deal with a percentage split between investors and the producer. The producer's share is known as the producer's net. If actors, writers, or other creative people have given up money payment up front for a percentage, they get a percentage of this net revenue coming to the producer. Many movies make money but never make a profit, in which case there is no producer's net. Five percent of zero is zero.

Writing for money means someone is paying you to think creatively and represent that thinking in coherent form on the page. In the entertainment world, this process is well understood in its three stages. It begins with a concept that expresses the premise and outlines the theme or story idea. This may be what starts the project after pitching. A lot of discussion with producers, directors, and possibly actors who are part of the project precedes the treatment.

The treatment is described in the contract and involves a partial payment of the total fee. A producer is usually entitled to pay for the treatment and then withdraw, depending on how the contract was negotiated. After the treatment has been read, a great deal of discussion ensues that allows the producer to react to the storyline and the vision expressed and, indeed, to ask for changes. Apart from the fact that money is changing hands, there is a strong need to look at story and character issues before committing further time and money to create the screenplay or script.

The first draft script or screenplay is the next stage of the contract that involves a delivery date and a payment schedule. This stage involves the most substantial investment of time and money. Most contracts provide for one revision after reading and discussion. After this, the contract is complete. When payment is made in full, the writer no longer owns the work. The producer might pay another writer to rewrite, or an actor or director might want their chosen writer to rework and revise the script. The producer then has to raise finance for the production, complete a production deal, and make the script into film or television programming that can be sold. More than one writer often works on a script. I have rewritten scripts and, in turn, have been rewritten myself by someone else. This is less common in the corporate world. However, I had to rewrite a corporate video made by for Shell that had been rejected by the client within the Shell group. Television scripts go through many rewrites by teams of writers. The writer is by turns a craftsman, a hack, a professional wordsmith, and an image maker. There are triumphs and disappointments. Live to write another day!

## Pitching

The process of script development is a serious activity on which all production depends. The name of the game is to get money behind a project at the earliest stage possible, namely, the writing stage. The most desirable situation to be in is to have a multiple-picture development deal. Only successful producers and directors get this

kind of speculative backing. Writers and other producers and directors often have to develop scripts to the treatment stage or even first draft screenplays before seeking financial backing. For the studios, commissioning scripts is like sowing seeds. Some will not germinate. Others will. As mentioned earlier, even those that become fully developed scripts might be bought and paid for and never get into production. Script development is the cheapest part of the process of movie production. Distributors need product. Studios need scripts and story ideas to stay in business. A movie idea begins as something relatively simple—a story premise—which is often presented in meetings to agents, producers, and other principals as a pitch.

We have discussed pitching in other contexts, but we should revisit the issue now. In the entertainment business, a writer must be able to talk about movie concepts as well as write them. A lot of ideas and projects are bought and sold on the basis of meetings at which creative people such as writers, producers, and directors talk about their ideas to a production executive. This process is called pitching. It is a skill. A writer should be able to pitch, but it is a skill that does not always accompany writing talent. To some extent, there is an element of salesmanship. You have to carry conviction in your manner, in your voice, and in your language. The pitch has to go beyond the reason why you want to write or do the project. It has to give reasons why someone else should want to get involved. It has to indicate how you see the project. It has to do this in language that makes sense to the executive making the decision to commit funds to your project over all of the other projects vying for the same resources. As we have noted, there is no shortage of scripts and projects, only good scripts and good projects.

Many executives who make decisions about development don't read. They don't have time, ability, or inclination. They have readers. However, they do listen to pitches. Pitching must be an efficient way to process proposals. I learned about pitching the hard way. I understood what it was by failing to do it successfully. I was commissioned to write a movie script for American International Pictures. I was working in London at the time with an executive in the London office. The day came when Samuel Arkoff, president of the company, came to town to decide what to do about this sequel, which the company had commissioned from me, to their remake of *Wuthering Heights* (1970). He checked into a suite at the Savoy. A meeting was scheduled at the hotel with me and the London executive producer. Sam Arkoff was in his bathrobe and slippers. He ordered a sumptuous lunch of oysters, smoked salmon, and chateau bottled French wine, which was brought to the room. Then the moment came. He asked me what the movie was about. I was stunned. I assumed that if the company had paid me to write the script (it had been sent to the Hollywood office), he would have read it. He hadn't read it.<sup>2</sup>

He wanted the concept. What was the approach? What was the driving idea that would hold audiences and give him the conviction to put money into producing the movie? I made a mess of it. I got bogged down in too much detail. In retrospect, I realize I was being paid to pitch. To get my movie into production and to direct it,



I had to pitch to save the project and the London executive. I earned the scriptwriting fee, but the movie was never made and the London executive was let go and the office shut down as the industry hit a crisis of rising debt and falling box office.

*The Player* (1992), mentioned earlier, was an original screenplay written and produced by Michael Tolkin. This movie provides excellent insight into the art of pitching. Pitching is a brief oral delivery of a summary or key concept of a movie. If the idea is strong, it is somehow seen as a firm anchor for the ensuing work. Sometimes development deals are made on this basis.

In the end, this is a commercial business. Hollywood is in business to make money. Of course, nobody knows for sure what makes money. There are tried-and-true formulas that keep resurfacing. You put money into a movie just like another one that made money or that is going to make money. The me-too syndrome is evident in every season's releases. Another way to try and minimize risk is to build a project around proven box office elements, usually an "A list" of actors and actresses whose movies have nearly always made money. Of course, their agents know this and push for the highest fee and participation they can. So movies get more expensive. If a project starts to become a package with the elements of stars, director, and so on, it usually affects the script both before and after it is written. William Goldman's book is the best document from a writer's point of view of how and why this happens.<sup>3</sup>

Big time pitching is not a real possibility at the beginning of a writer's career. There is an amazingly vigorous independent movie sector of low-budget, interesting movies. These movies are made outside the mainstream studio system. There are money finders who work on putting finance deals together for productions like *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) that might make it into release. There are a lot of hungry, ambitious people. You have to become one of them. You have to learn the business. Pitching at this level means finding like-minded people and persuading them that your idea or your script is worth spending time and effort on to move forward. In every generation, new talent arises and old talent retires. Each generation produces a new audience that craves to see its realities reflected in movie and television stories and images. Life is a pitch, as someone once said.

## Ideology, Morality, and Content

Broadly speaking, the entertainment industry is an uneasy alliance between expressive storytelling, the box office, and the bottom line. It is a simple fact that no one will back a movie or television project without the belief that there is a large audience for the finished program. And why should they? Hollywood producers and distributors speak of movies as product. "Produce" is the key verb of the industry. Product is the result of production. Product is what generates revenue that allows a company to survive, grow, and pay dividends. More particularly, it allows a producer to stay in business and produce again. To a considerable extent, the

same rationale governs the work of writers and directors. If your movies don't make money, that is, don't attract an audience large enough to generate a return of at least the cost of production and distribution, your talent will be viewed with suspicion.

The uneasy alliance between art and commerce makes for a permanent tension and a continuing debate. Remember—it is called “the film industry!” The extreme of the Hollywood industrial view is epitomized by the classic bon mot of Louis B. Mayer “If you've got a message, take it to Western Union.” MGM's movies were about entertainment, pleasing the public, and supplying it with whatever sensations would make the most money. Movie distributors are often contemptuous of art house movies because they are hard to sell and have smaller audiences and, therefore, less return for the same effort. The predominant mentality seems to be the hunt for the biggest box office rather than the smaller budget films that bring a proportionate return from smaller audiences. In the words of Sam Goldwyn: “I don't care if it doesn't make a nickel. I just want every man, woman, and child in America to see it.”

The dilemma here lies in the question of what appeals to audiences. If you survey the movies you know and those that are celebrated successes, you could very well argue that very large audiences thrive on messages. Some of these messages can be paraphrased:

- Good ultimately triumphs over evil (westerns, police thrillers).
- Life is basically good and worth living (*It's a Wonderful Life*).
- Sacrifice for a cause such as your country is noble—the old Roman dictum, *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*, meaning “It is sweet and proper to die for your country.” (most war films).
- Love conquers all (most romantic comedies).
- True love is happiness, or happiness is true love (most love stories).
- Action trumps intellect (most action films celebrate the man of action, not the man of rational thought).
- Revenge is sweet (killing your enemy who has done you wrong is your right).
- The underdog can win (*Rocky*, 1976).

The race is not to the swift nor the battle to the strong, but if you are a betting man, as Damon Runyon said, and a movie producer, that's who you put your money on.

To put it simply, most popular movies are stuffed with messages about heroism and myths about love conquering all. The biggest message of all is the happy ending. It is difficult to sell stories without a happy ending, whether it is the triumph of the hero or the proposal of marriage that concludes a romance. There usually has to be a strong message of hope, of overcoming adversity, or at least benefiting the nation or the human race. This is not a bad thing. However, tragedy, loss, and pain have another truth that audiences also recognize.

A number of ideological themes are woven into a lot of movies and television. World War II movies are nearly always patriotic propaganda. Although characters might die, they do not die in vain, and they die heroically. It was noticeable how few movies about Vietnam were filmed because that undeclared war brought humiliation to the United States and discord at home. The movies that were made like *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) had to deal with the dark side of America—the My Lai massacre of civilians, the defoliation of jungles with Agent Orange, the high-altitude bombing of Hanoi with B-52s, and the draft dodging and political protest. Coppola made *Apocalypse Now* into a parable about moral degeneration based on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. It was difficult to find redemption in these three movies unless it was the refusal to shoot the noble stag at the end of *The Deer Hunter*, thereby celebrating life.

We see a constant ambivalence concerning crime and law and order. The movies have always glamorized gangsters even though they may have to die in a hail of bullets in the end. Until then, the audience gets a kind of fantasy outing in which power and invincibility rule. The writer has to make the central characters interesting. The movie and television series literature about the Mafia reveals the greatest ambivalence. The Mafia began as neighborhood protection of poor immigrants but ended up as a cancer corrupting everything it touched. Only the *Godfather* trilogy made by Francis Ford Coppola really shows the destruction of family, self, and relationships that are the inevitable consequence of the Mafia code of silence, violence, and revenge. Sometimes it seems as if the movies are a propaganda machine for the Mafia itself, showing its power, creating larger-than-life characters, and solidifying its mythic status in American society.

Crime makes for more interesting dramatic material than the humdrum life of law-abiding citizens. In films, the police are often the butt of ridicule. Their cruisers are involved in spectacular pileups. The cliché chase sequence makes you root for the fleeing criminal rather than the police. Television, in contrast, seems to favor the police and the heroic public service of the keepers of law and order. In either medium and in every script, the depiction of violence is an overwhelming fact of screen entertainment. It began in the modern era with the slow-motion shootout in *The Wild Bunch* (1969). It becomes a kind of stylized entertainment in kung-fu movies, and it is delivered with clever, almost blasé ruthlessness in *Pulp Fiction* (1994). The trick seems to be to provide a legitimate excuse for the audience to indulge in a spectacle of violence by setting up a character with a plausible motive for revenge. For a century, the movies have evolved certain cliché set pieces—the fist fight, the shootout, and the car chase—that each generation seems to reinvent. Although this is not a forum in which these issues can be resolved, it is difficult not to suspect a relationship between the violent themes and images of big and small screen entertainment and the sickening violence that pervades American society. Adolescent kids, the most vulnerable audience, resort to guns and mass killing to express their anger and frustration. Are they acting out what they see on the

screen? Movies glamorize violence and sensationalize life on the one hand, while sentimentalizing it on the other with fantasy relationships. Who is responsible? Producers, directors, or writers?

Like an addict who needs larger doses of a drug to get high, modern audiences seem to need more and more graphic violence to get their fix. How do you deal with these issues as a writer? There is a very definite pressure to do likewise, or even to up the ante, to go further, and think up a novel way to present violence to the audience so as to sell your work. Whatever you write, you will have to think about whether you are writing imitative scripts or writing something that is authentic. There is no doubt that commercial pressure places the media writer in a moral dilemma.

## Emotional Honesty and Sentimentality

Movies and television are about human emotions. People in conflict and under stress react emotionally. Their principles and morals are tested. The spectacle of a character confronting destiny and undergoing evolution through challenges fascinates audiences. Just as the Greeks explored the tragic dilemmas and comic absurdities of their society in their theatre, movies and TV mirror all our cultural dilemmas and moral conflicts. We have a long list of social issues such as drugs, AIDS, gender discrimination, disabilities, crime, abortion, and so on. Many movies and television programs have subtle and not-so-subtle agendas. It is interesting to speculate whether the program content reflects or leads the cultural consciousness of the day. Many movies have a distinct cultural bias and even a political agenda. The story plays to an ideological message as surely as Communist countries used to make films that celebrated the working class hero.

*GI Jane* (1997) seems to me an example of an agenda-driven storyline. A woman wants to become a Navy SEAL. At a political level, she is the pawn of a woman senator who wants to push the issue of gender equality in the armed services. She is shown going through the training, including being physically beaten up by the master chief—total equality. Her head is shaven. She has to meet the same standards of physical endurance as the male recruits. It ends with a secret raid inside Libya in which she proves her operational skills and gains acceptance as one of the guys. It is easy to fabricate the endurance and the performance in the movies, which in real life would not be likely. It is in a sense exploitation and sensationalism. A star like Demi Moore is always a star. So her character has to be written to succeed.<sup>4</sup>

The feminist agenda is quite prevalent in movies and television today. Although many issues of gender equality are topical and meaningful, men in turn become stereotyped and masculinity pilloried. Sometimes, there is a bias that distorts the truth. John Updike's novel, *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987), was made into a movie that turned it upside down. The three leading ladies, Cher, Susan Sarandon, and

Michelle Pfeiffer, played the witches who became the victims instead of the persecutors of a new man in the neighborhood who in the movie becomes the Devil incarnate, played by Jack Nicholson. Instead of three women trying to undo the man, who is the victim in the novel, with spells and esoteric practices, it is politically more attractive to play it the other way around. The basic message is female power is good, male power is bad. There used to be a grade-school chant, “What are little boys made of? Slugs and snails and puppy dogs tails—that’s what little boys are made of. What are little girls made of? Sugar and spice and all that’s nice. That’s what little girls are made of.” It is interesting to note how easily men’s bodies are used as cannon fodder, men’s lives are expendable, and men’s pain allowable. Think how often you see men getting kicked or hit in the genitals. This is often made into a joke. Men kick men. Women kick men. You never see a woman kicked in the genitals, or punched in the breast, and it wouldn’t ever be funny. Alert yourself to the amount and the extent of ideological agendas that are built into many scripts.

The most important form of emotional dishonesty is sentimentality. It is the substitution of a lesser emotion for a greater one while trying to achieve the same result. It appeals to the lowest common denominator of emotion. It oversimplifies life, death, and love to perpetuate a comfortable illusion. It is escape versus realism, glossing over the complexities of experience to provide an easy formula for getting a tear, a laugh, a patriotic swelling of the chest. It turns complexity and subtlety into cartoons. Indeed, the Disney product, whether in movies or in theme parks, has always been larded with great dollops of sentimentality. Disney presents images of innocence and purity with all the nasty bits cleansed away. The projection of human emotions onto animal characters, cuteness as virtue, love without sexuality—it all gets served up as an easy substitute for experience, like processed food with sugar and coloring added to make it more attractive.

Sentimentality drives *Pretty Woman* (1990)—the fantasy that a hooker is really a lady and gets to marry a millionaire and be treated like a princess. This is betrayed by the tag line: “She walked off the street, into his life and stole his heart.” Once Julia Roberts is cast in the role, we know there has to be a romantic triumph of these proportions. None of the sordid reality of this profession is ever revealed. Nor is the psychology of prostitution ever dealt with. It is a fantasy world. Julia Roberts is just playing at being a streetwalker. She is really never anything but an actress and a nice girl in hooker’s clothing, who knows that by the end of the movie she is going to change her costume. The contrast is with her hooker friend, Kit, played by Laura San Giacomo. The movies have glossed over American historical realities such as slavery, genocide, discrimination, lynching, social inequalities, and political corruption. They have even advocated racism. D. W. Griffith, one of the greatest and most inventive pioneers in the medium, made the first feature-length epic, *Birth of a Nation* (1915), which celebrated the Ku Klux Klan. Then movies have also become a way to change public perception. *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), with Sidney Poitier, showed how a black detective in the South dealt

with prejudice and a Southern sheriff. Sidney Poitier also pioneered in portraying a mixed-race relationship in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). Kevin Costner made a 4-hour movie (director's cut), *Dances with Wolves* (1990), that reexamined the racist and genocidal assumptions that lie behind the American folklore of the frontier.

European films have less of the sentimental tradition. However, few of them get wide distribution. If they do, they often get remade into a softened version for American consumption. *Trois Hommes et un Couffin* (1985), about three men who get stuck with a baby and have to learn to look after it—a great comic premise—was turned into an American version, *Three Men and a Baby* (1987), that takes gritty social observation and turns it into sentimentality. The British TV sitcom *Until Death Do Us Part* was bought, tamed, and turned into *All in the Family*. Although there are cultural reasons why one country's humor won't play in another's, there is also a puritanism in American culture that has always restricted the movie treatment of many themes.

Reflect about those movies that command attention and hold audiences, long after their initial release and the video sales have dwindled! Their success is difficult to predict beforehand. Big box office is sometimes ephemeral, resulting from a fad or a public mood. Some big grossing movies fade into oblivion. *Citizen Kane* (1941) was not a box office hit, but it is a great movie that is technically brilliant and compelling viewing every time you watch it. Of course, its release was sabotaged by William Randolph Hearst whose life it paraphrased in an unflattering way. *Casablanca* (1942) is a great love story that is compelling because it is not sentimental. Rick does not get Ilsa. Although he is bitter about losing her, he deals with the reality. He salvages something from it. They love one another, but they are not going to be together. Rick helps his rival instead of beating him up as is the custom in American movies of the day.

It is very difficult to write without conviction. Ultimately, you have to write what your gut tells you is true for you and true for the audience. Nevertheless, there are many commercial pressures to create or include elements that are imitative—the car chase, the fight, the love scene with the movie kiss. It is hard to be original. It is hard to be truthful. Many of the best American movies come from the independent sector—interesting, gritty movies that explore out-of-the-way themes. They go to the Sundance Film Festival and get picked up for distribution and the makers move on to bigger budgets and greater temptations. Complex, subtle movies are difficult to create such as *Sling Blade* (1996), which was rewarded with an Oscar. *Election* (1999) looks at ambition and sexuality in a high school election that hints at the realities of the larger political world in which the heroine ends up. *Chasing Amy* (1997) deals with youth, gender, and sexuality in a way that is refreshing and funny. *Body Shots* (1999) is a tightly-observed comment on the complexity of social and sexual behavior of men and women and their different expectations in post-feminist Los Angeles at the end of the 1990s. The script uses the theatrical aside in an interesting way so that characters break off and speak to the audience through the

camera lens, making comments about the way a man or a woman sees the opposite sex. It recalls the innovation in the 1999 television series *Once and Again*.

Think about it! Most people experience a lot of pain from the experience of falling in love. Half the time it is with the wrong person, or the love is not requited, or the relationship stagnates into a routine, low-temperature marriage full of compromises and the extinction of passion. Fifty percent of marriages end in divorce. Everyday relationships are not often the stuff of movies and television. Passion, lust, and jealousy are. So movies and soaps are seldom about the routine married life unless they satirize it. A television show like *Married with Children* mocks the state of marriage as daily warfare and endless insults. The Academy Award-winning original screenplay and movie of 2000 was *American Beauty* (1999), which is a searing exposure of the social and emotional failure of the American family at the turn of the century. So truthfulness without a happy ending can result in commercial success.

There is no easy answer. There is no future in writing scripts that don't get produced. You can train yourself to be a journeyman hack and make a living. Despite craft and technique, the animus for your writing has to come from your center, from what you know and believe. That voice of authenticity is what carries the day in the end. It is probably true to say that there is room for so many kinds of writing that you would be foolish to fabricate writing that you cannot sustain and that you do not genuinely want to do.

## Writing for the Corporate World

At first, most students are ambitious to work in the entertainment side of the industry. Although it is the most lucrative, it is also the hardest to get into. The largest employer, both in terms of salaried jobs and freelance work, is the business world. The need for writers who can design content for corporate communications needs is immense. In every major town across America, wherever businesses are to be found, you will also find production companies and advertising agencies that are in business to solve their communications problems. They need writers. It is not just that this pays the rent while you are waiting for your screenplay to be read and optioned; it is a fascinating and creative field in itself. It is very innovative and requires you to be able to think about new media and keep up with what is happening in the industry. Every job exposes you to a new product or service and introduces you to whole new worlds of business activity. Sometimes these are highly technical and about business-to-business products and services that you don't normally come across. It requires a curious and adaptive spirit and someone who is able to assimilate new material quickly and get to the heart of a problem.

How do you get started? One way is to write for no pay for a charity or public service organization that usually gets *pro bono* creative help from the industry.

In the corporate chapter, we discussed a public service announcement about addictive gambling. This was produced by Pontes/Buckley Advertising, Inc. and by writers, technicians, and talent from the Boston chapter of the Media Communications Association.

There is a chicken and egg problem. You need experience before someone will entrust you with a high-value corporate job. To get experience you need to get a job. Another way would be to write for cable access channels, which exist in every community. You can even produce the program yourself. If the program is successful, it can be played on other cable access channels or even taken up by a commercial cable channel. More important is that you have a “reel” that shows program content for which you have a writing credit. It can become a calling card.

## Client Relationships

When you work for a client, you have entered into a business relationship. You are being paid to do a job to your client’s satisfaction. Someone is paying you for your creative writing talent to solve a communications problem that they cannot solve for themselves. A creative service is somewhat of a mystery. I once worked for a management consultant writing training videos. I had to go to Belgium and visit their client’s site—the national steel company. I was given a desk to write at. The manager would come in now and then and wonder what I had produced in the last couple of hours because he was paying for my services by the day. His idea of writing was constant output. My approach was to visit the factory for visual input, read background, and stare out of the window until I had thought the problem through, found a solution, somewhat like the seven steps outlined in Chapter 4. Once I knew the answers to the questions and I had the creative concept, I could write very quickly.

The point is that not everyone understands what he is paying a writer for. It is problematic for them to put a value on the work. Are they paying by the hour? The hour that you chew pencils also counts but seems a waste of money to the client. On the whole, writers are paid for piecework. You quote a fee for the whole job, broken down into stages with a schedule of payments. Some people pay by the minute, say, two hundred dollars per minute of finished program. These last two methods of payment hide the pencil chewing and the thinking time and deal with a measurable result. The most common mode of payment for corporate work is a flat fee for the finished product. You estimate what time is involved in terms of research, travel, and writing. You multiply that by your notional or daily fee. You come up with a price for the whole job. Your producer or your client either agrees or negotiates. Sometimes you need to be working on more than one job at a time because there is waiting time while your producer/client reads the script or circulates it to others for reading. You need to be productive during this downtime.

## Corporate Contracts

The transfer of intellectual property is implicit in all corporate writing. Either you are employed as a writer by a corporation that by virtue of paying you a salary for your work owns your writing output, or you are a freelance writer who is contracted by the corporation or a producer in a production company to create a script. That contract may often be, and usually is, verbal and implicit, governed by custom and practice in the industry. You will not often have a written contract because to provide a written contract usually incurs legal costs. The nature of the contract and its salient features are so well understood that most work is done on trust.

Nevertheless, it is a wise practice to follow up all verbal agreements with a letter confirming the understanding. For instance, when a client signs off on a treatment or a script, I always write a letter saying that following our meeting and discussion on such and such a date, I am now proceeding with the treatment/script/revision based on agreement of the following points. Mentioning delivery dates is also a good idea. The letters have legal value in the event of a dispute or in the event that the client changes his mind. You need to have an agreement about a payment schedule and state what it is in a confirming letter. It is vitally important to get some form of partial payment up front as a sign of good faith. You do not expect to get final payment until the client has signed off on the final draft. Once again, your copyright in your work is assigned to the person who pays you, but only after you've been paid. The problem is that if you do not get paid, the custom crafted script is of little value to the writer.

Several types of payment agreement are used for corporate writing. You can divide the project into concept/outline, treatment, and shooting script. Each stage is valued at a third of the total and paid for in increments. This method of payment allows the producer to pay as he goes and protects you, the writer, from not getting paid at the end. In fact, it is a good idea to get one-third up front. Production companies use other formulas also. One way of valuing writing is by the minute of final program. Another is as a percentage of the production budget. A script for a video that costs one hundred thousand dollars to make might have a script element that is worth a percentage of the production budget, say, five thousand dollars. All of these ways of calculating a writing fee are based on experience and history. You can generally work out what it takes to write a minute of script based on research time, outline and treatment work, and final scriptwriting. You express that time and effort as a figure defined by the end result.

Writing involves two aspects that both cost money. The first is time. It takes time to think and write. Based on your experience, how long will it take you to write a ten-minute video? You calculate the hours and put a price on your time. You round out the figure. You also have to think about what other writers are charging. If you are experienced and respected in the industry, you have your price and can afford to be choosy. If you are a beginner, you have to be as flexible as you can. There are producers who try to exploit writers by asking for a script at a

knock-down price on the promise of other work to come. I have learned that this other work never comes. I usually refuse these kinds of deals or offer to discount the second script. That usually flushes out the dishonest operators.

The second aspect of writing is creativity. Creative work and imagination have a value. It is hard to measure and impossible to cost. When it works, it is priceless. Advertising agencies charge for creative services. Graphic designers charge for creative flair. The writer is in the same business: selling creative ideas. A great creative idea cannot be costed in terms of time. Sometimes, I have made it through my seven steps in a flash. I know before I leave the meeting how I will solve the problem. Creative talent has a value. To the extent that the market will bear, you can charge for creative flair and originality. You hope to build a reputation that people will be glad to pay a premium for. Your demonstrated track record and finished work back it up. It takes a lot of work to build this kind of reputation. It also gets you prestige projects to work on rather than run-of-the-mill training videos. So different jobs can be costed and charged differently based on the nature of the product and the client.

## Work for Hire

### *Marketing Yourself and Your Work*

In the business world, you hope for repeat business. You must also build business by introducing yourself to new producers and new corporate clients usually by showing them some of your work and a resume. Whenever you are not writing, you should be on the phone trying to make new contacts. You have to sell your talent and your creative services. There are not many agents who represent corporate media writers. There is not enough money in it for the agent, and it is too specialized. This is an advantage because you are not shut out of the game by an agent barrier, which can indeed inhibit your entry into the entertainment world. In addition, you get to keep all the money earned without having to pay a commission.

### *Copyright*

Copyright is an agreement, either in common law or statute, that the original work of a creator of words, images, music, or other media is an intellectual property as opposed to a physical property. The creator has a right in what is created and owns that work until that ownership is assigned to another for payment. The purpose of the contract is to transfer title in the property parallel to the transfer of title in real estate. If you do not copyright your work in the United States, it falls into the public domain. This means anyone can copy it. Eventually, all intellectual property falls into the public domain 70 years after the author dies. Copyright law is different in different countries. In Europe, for instance, copyright is inherent in a work; you do not have to create copyright as you do in the United States. It is deemed to exist

de facto because of the act of creation. There are international copyright conventions that protect work beyond the national borders of its country of origin.

You need to understand that you cannot copyright an idea. You have to create something that has recognizable shape and form and individuality in order to copyright it. This is very important when dealing with scripts and ideas for entertainment program content. An idea or concept for a movie is hard to copyright. A treatment is an expressed idea that has particular identity and acquires the quality of intellectual property. A screenplay, book manuscript, or play manuscript has clear identity as the output of a particular creator. Because you cannot copyright an idea, it is important not to discuss it before making it into intellectual property. The Writers Guilds provide a service that enables you to register a script. This becomes a strong, dated proof of ownership, although it does not create copyright under U.S. law. You should register your script if you submit your work to any potential buyer.

Copyright and clear title to intellectual property are crucial to the entertainment industry. Whether the source is an original screenplay, a book in the public domain, or existing intellectual property in a book, play, or manuscript of the same, it is essential that at each stage of production and distribution, every element of writing, performance, and sound track has clear title. Any flaw in title puts a huge investment at risk and leaves the producer open to claims for payment from any party who holds title to a part of that intellectual property. All contracts involving the assignment of intellectual property require the grantor of the right to indemnify the grantee against any flaw in title and to assume all liability for any flaw. This indemnity is demanded by investors, studios, and end distributors, right down to the end exhibitor.

The integrity of the title is of paramount importance. Lawyers involved in drafting contracts will always demand proof of title and/or an indemnity against all liability and any future claims. Again, there is a parallel to real estate transactions. You cannot acquire title in something the seller does not have title to. This is why you buy title insurance in a real estate transaction. However, it is easier to verify title in the registry office of a town that probably keeps very good records of ownership for reasons of taxation levied on the property. Title in works of imagination expressed in words that anyone can copy, or ideas that anyone can copy, are more difficult to protect.

Students sometimes take plagiarism lightly and are careless about identifying their sources. As a professional writer, you must have a vigorous respect for these issues because you are proposing to sell a piece of intellectual property. You must be able to assert your title to what you have created and what you propose to the buyer. For example, you cannot sell a script or screenplay based on a work that you do not own. You can write it, but it will have no value. Although you have created copyright in writing your screenplay, you will have created a piece of work that has a split copyright. I once optioned a novel through an agent. I wrote a screenplay to get it set up as a movie. The option expired before I could get any preproduction going. Of course, I could go back and re-option the book. In the end, it didn't work out. My screenplay is a work with split copyright. Any producer can buy the

underlying work and decouple it from my screenplay and get someone else to write another screenplay based on the same source work. I have no rights. When novels or plays are popular, their media rights have value.

Only major players in the entertainment business can ante up the option money or bid for these rights. For this reason, it is better to adapt work in the public domain. However, there is still a split copyright because anyone else can go to the same source in the public domain and create a new derivative work equal to yours and independent of yours. This happened to me. I wrote an adaptation of Henry James's *Daisy Miller*. I approached Peter Bogdanovich, the director, with the idea that it would be a great idea for a movie and a perfect role for Cybill Shepherd, his girlfriend at the time. It just so happened that he had had the same idea and was developing *Daisy Miller* as his next project. I had no claim, and he had no obligation.

#### *Work-Made-for-Hire and Freelance*

Writers who are employees of a company, such as a production company, or indeed, journalists working for a publication, are deemed to be offering a service for hire so that the copyright in what they write is automatically owned by the employer who pays the salary of the writer. The analogy is to the worker on a shop floor. Ford does not have to pay a worker for creating a car but only for the time on the job. By analogy a freelance writer who is paid by the hour or by the minute of finished script or for a completed script, is governed by a work-made-for-hire principle. If a company pays a writer in this way, it owns the copyright in the work produced completely.

There is another way to govern the contractual relationship. A freelance writer is paid for a piece of work, created by the writer as an independent, imaginative enterprise. It remains the property of the creator until a bargain is struck, and terms are set by which the ownership in the creation is transferred. A freelance writer enters into an agreement to transfer ownership in his intellectual property for payment. Broadly speaking, there are two ways to do this. It is sometimes part of the agreement that the writer retains some rights for some media or some territories, especially in journalism, where content can be resold or sold in another medium like a web site. So a writer might be made by the word for a specific publication. In media writing, scripts are usually dedicated to one production and can have no after life. Nevertheless, in the entertainment world, new media are springing up all the time. There is some dispute now about whether content that is delivered to cell phones is covered by agreements which did not include those rights. Writers' Guilds try to defend writers' copyright. Publishers, producers and employers of writing talent try to word contracts to include all media and those not yet invented because they have been burned so many times by having to renegotiate rights for sales for new media. We take video tape, DVDs, MP3s, and the internet for granted, but writers want participation in the revenue for sales of content based on their work in new forms of distribution.

## Agents and Submissions

Agents have become indispensable in the entertainment business for selling ideas and scripts. To get a start in the entertainment side of the business, you need an agent who can represent you and in turn sell your work to producers and studios. You understand now why producers and studios are extremely prudent about where their material originates. Unsolicited manuscripts and scripts are usually rejected because of negative past experiences of lawsuits and claims by people who submitted work, had it rejected, and then saw a movie that contained what they saw as their idea. By dealing with agents, intellectual property lawyers, and professional intermediaries, studios are protected from frivolous lawsuits and are ensured they are acquiring bona fide intellectual property rights.

Agents work speculatively, of course. They earn no commission until they sell your work. Obviously, they have to be convinced that their work of representing your work and your talent will bear fruit. A relationship with an agent can be good and bad. It can be deceptive. You have to work in good faith. Sometimes, you can make assumptions about how well you are being represented that are unfounded. This is a business relationship that is very important and a difficult one to make work well.

A good place to start is the Writers Guild web site, which lists agents by state, classified according to their business orientation.<sup>5</sup> Those agents who will read unsolicited manuscripts are identified, as are those who won't. A number of agents or script advisors will read and critique your work for a fee. Some of them may be legitimate and give value for money. Some advertise merely to make money from the endless stream of "wannabes" who dream of success. The best advice would be to get a reference or a recommendation from someone you know. Even better, make use of your writing classes. Your writing instructor is a sounding board and is duty-bound to read your work and give you feedback. Any course you take, therefore, provides a structured way to test your writing talent. You will get a clue as to whether it is worth the struggle to go forward and commit the time, energy, and ambition necessary to succeed professionally.

## Networking, Conventions, and Seminars

Writers are rather solitary creatures on the whole. For the most part, they work alone. Getting to know other writers is not that easy. That is why going to seminars and attending conventions are good ideas. In a way, it doesn't matter whether you meet other writers. You want to meet the people who will commission your work—producers, directors, and corporate advertising and PR executives.

A number of traveling writing seminars are given by scriptwriters and script doctors. One of them is sure to be coming to a venue near you during the year. That is a good way of getting a fast track to real professional issues. They are

not cheap. They are usually two- to three-day affairs and cost about five hundred dollars. If travel and hotel accommodation are added, attendance can be a costly exercise, but it is worth doing at least once to get professional advice and meet other like-minded people.

Writing seminars and panels are also given at a number of professional conventions. The Media Communications Association International has an annual convention at which there are always some panels devoted to scripting issues and marketing of writing skills in the corporate media marketplace. The National Association of Broadcasters brings most of the people on all sides of the industry together. Again panels are conducted and papers presented that are of interest to writers, particularly new media and interactive writers. These conventions are quite expensive when you add the costs of registration, travel, and the hotel. If you are making an income as a writer, these things become tax-deductible expenses, as would independent writing seminars.

## Surfing the Web

With the spread of the World Wide Web, writing and scriptwriting have benefited from dedicated web sites full of valuable information, such as the one for the Writers Guild and other professional bodies. Sites provide valuable databases of scripts, movies, and television production, as cited throughout this book. You can download or buy copies of scripts from most films and television series. There are chat rooms, script competitions and web sites for current television series and movies in production. There are online writing courses and script services. You have huge resources at your fingertips for research and for professional contacts. There are sites that provide shop windows for scripts looking for a producer. It is a way of circumventing the problem of finding an agent. In the accompanying DVD, you will find a long list of active links that will take you directly to the sites. Since you have to use a computer and its browser to explore them, there seems no point in listing URLs in print to be typed into a browser's search window when you can click on an active link in the DVD.



## Hybrid Careers

Some writers also have knowledge of production. They have, or can develop, skills as a producer or director or both. We have alluded to multitalented figures throughout the book from Orson Welles to James Cameron. Both in the entertainment world and in the corporate world, a combination of talents can be very useful. You have to do whatever it takes. The path of development for each person always involves an element of character and an element of destiny.

## Conclusion

Writing is a risky business. It is a bet on your own talent like most artistic pursuits. You can train and develop your talent. There is, however, no guarantee of success. If you are going to try to make a living as a writer of scripts, you have to be professional and disciplined. You have to want to reach audiences. You have to want to move audiences. That is your motivation, not just the money. You have to be the audience as well as the writer. You have to be obsessed with understanding what makes people choke with emotion, laugh, feel outrage, and cheer for a character they identify with. This feeling for the audience must underlie any writing. Even writing a training video for a corporate client requires very careful consideration of the people in the audience. You need to think about what they need to know, how they will understand, and whether you have communicated successfully. An audience is an audience, whether for a big screen movie, or a how-to training video, or a web site that presents a corporate face to the world.

As you become more adept at creating for one or another media, you will want to explore the works of other professionals who have written more specialized works, as listed in the bibliography at the end of this book. Remember! Many write; few are chosen. Whatever you do, whatever you become, this writer wishes you the best possible breaks and the courage to fulfill your creative potential. In this spirit, I hope this book has been a worthwhile learning experience and will provide you with a foundation for your chosen craft.

## Exercises

1. Call up a few agents and try to find out whether they will accept new writers or read unsolicited manuscripts.
2. Visit the Writers Guild web sites (UK and USA East and West) and find out what you have to do to register a script.
3. Contact a television series editor and find out whether you can submit a spec script for that series.
4. Make a plan for your professional development as a writer.
5. Call up three corporate production companies in your area and find out whether they will look at some of your work.
6. Contact a nonprofit organization or a charity and ask if they have any media projects planned and whether you can do some writing for them at no cost.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Lorian Tamara Elbert (Editor), *Why We Write: Personal Statements and Photographic Portraits of 25 Top Screenwriters* (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 1999),

p. xiv: "...only five percent of the approximately 8,500 Writers Guild members actually make a living from their writing."

<sup>2</sup>Correspondence included on the DVD shows that he had read the treatment.

<sup>3</sup>William Goldman, *Adventures in the Screen Trade* (New York: Warner Books, 1983).

<sup>4</sup>See the review at the Internet Movie Data Base web site: <http://us.imdb.com/CommentsShow?119173>.

<sup>5</sup>See <http://www.writersguild.org>.

# APPENDIX

## Script Formats

### Dual Column: PSA, Documentary, Corporate

<p>The visual look is cold, monochromatic blue.</p>	<p><i>(MUSIC—increasing tension.)</i> <i>(SFX—The pulse of a racing heart.)</i></p>
<p>FADE UP ON . . . EXT. ALLEY. DAY. (4 seconds) An urban alley in a poor part of town. Garbage and debris litter the ground.</p>	<p><i>(Over this sound, we hear a series of DESPERATE VOICES.)</i></p>
<p>From a low angle, we look up at a tough, angry thirteen-year-old BOY. A CIGARETTE is jammed into the corner of his mouth. He walks through the alley with anger and attitude, kicking at the trash and smashing his book bag against the wall.</p>	<p>WOMAN'S VOICE (VO) (angry, frustrated, desperate, rising in pitch, losing control) (slight echo) The school called again. What am I going to do with you?!</p>
<p>The image in the alley is interrupted by a FLASH CUT (1 second) (Full color.) A happy family PORTRAIT. A single mother and the thirteen-year-old boy. He's dressed neatly in a tie. A jagged CRACK slices across the glass.</p>	<p><i>(SFX—Glass cracking.)</i> <i>(1 second)</i></p>

<p>CUT TO . . .  INT. ROOM. NIGHT.  (4 seconds)  A young BOY, six or seven, huddles against a wall, terror and pain in his eyes.  Behind him, we see the SILHOUETTES of a man hitting a woman.</p>	<p>(SFX—<i>Woman crying. Struggling. Bottle breaking.</i>)  FATHER'S VOICE (VO)  (angry, drunk, slurred speech)  (SFX—SLAP.)  Don't you <u>ever</u> turn away (SLAP) from <u>me</u> when I'm <u>talking!</u> (SLAP)</p>
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## Master Scene Script: Feature Film for Cinema and Television

DAISY  
(fluttering eyelashes)

I'm late. I'm sure you didn't mind waiting.

WINTERBOURNE

Not at all.

DAISY

I just didn't want to go to Chillon by carriage.  
I have such a passion for those lake steamers.  
They're so sweet.

They walk out the front door of the hotel.

CUT TO

EXT. LAKE FRONT - DAY

There is a lot of commotion as passengers board a steamer Moored along side. DAISY and WINTERBOURNE in LONG SHOT. She is quite sudden in her movements as she moves up the Gangway. The steamer blows its whistle and prepares to cast off. There is a summer breeze rippling the lake.

EXT. LAKE STEAMER DECK - DAY

WINTERBOURNE feels they are on an adventure as they stroll the deck. DAISY is animated and charming. She is not flustered when she is

aware than people are staring at her. People look at her because she is pretty and because of her unconventional manners and apparent liberty with her escort. They find a seat on the deck and WINTERBOURNE looks at her enchanted while she chatters on.

DAISY

I wish we had steamers like this in America.

WINTERBOURNE

Well what about on the Mississippi?

DAISY

I don't live near the Mississippi.

WINTERBOURNE

Well, we've got the trip back to look forward to.

DAISY

What's your first name, again?

WINTERBOURNE

Frederick!

## Scene Script, Version 1: Television Sitcoms and Series

DAISY

(fluttering eyelashes)

I'm late. I'm sure you didn't mind waiting.

WINTERBOURNE

Not at all!

DAISY

I just don't want to go to Chillon by carriage.  
I have such a passion for those lake steamers.  
They're so sweet.

THEY WALK OUT THE FRONT DOOR OF THE HOTEL.

CUT TO

EXT. LAKE FRONT - DAY

THERE IS A LOT OF COMMOTION AS PASSENGERS BOARD A STEAMER MOORED ALONG SIDE. DAISY AND WINTER BOURNE IN LONG SHOT. SHE IS QUITE SUDDEN IN HER MOVEMENTS AS SHE MOVES UP THE GANGWAY. THE STEAMER BLOWS ITS WHISTLE AND PREPARES TO CAST OFF. THERE IS A SUMMER BREEZE RIPPLING THE LAKE.

EXT. LAKE STEAMER DECK - DAY

WINTERBOURNE FEELS THEY ARE ON AN ADVENTURE AS THEY STROLL THE DECK. DAISY IS ANIMATED AND CHARMING. SHE IS NOT FLUSTERED WHEN SHE IS AWARE THAN PEOPLE ARE STARING AT HER. PEOPLE LOOK AT HER BECAUSE SHE IS PRETTY AND BECAUSE OF HER UNCONVENTIONAL MANNERS AND APPARENT LIBERTY WITH HER ESCORT. THEY FIND A SEAT ON THE DECK AND WINTERBOURNE LOOKS AT HER ENCHANTED WHILE SHE CHATTERS ON.

DAISY

I wish we had steamers like this in America.

WINTERBOURNE

Well, what about on the Mississippi?

## Scene Script, Version 2: Television Sitcoms and Series

SCENE 33

DAISY

(FLUTTERING EYELASHES)

Am I late? I'm sure you didn't mind waiting.

WINTERBOURNE

Not at all!

DAISY

I just didn't want to go to Chillon by carriage.

I have such a passion for those lake steamers.

They're so sweet.

CUT TO

EXT. LAKE FRONT DAY

(THERE IS A LOT OF COMMOTION AS PASSENGERS BOARD A STEAMER MOORED ALONG SIDE. DAISY AND WINTERBOURNE INLONG SHOT. SHE IS QUITE SUDDEN IN HER MOVEMENTS AS SHE MOVES UP THE GANGWAY. THE STEAMER BLOWS ITS WHISTLE AND PREPARES TO CAST OFF. THERE IS A SUMMER BREEZE RIPPLING THE LAKE.)

EXT. LAKE STEAMER DECK - DAY

(WINTERBOURNE FEELS THEY ARE ON AN ADVENTURE AS THEY STROLL THE DECK. DAISY IS ANIMATED AND CHARMING. SHE IS NOT FLUSTERED WHEN SHE IS AWARE THAT PEOPLE ARE STARING AT HER. PEOPLE LOOK AT HER BECAUSE SHE IS PRETTY AND BECAUSE OF HER UNCONVENTIONAL MANNERS AND APPARENT LIBERTY WITH HER ESCORT. THEY FIND A SEAT ON THE DECK AND WINTERBOUNRE LOOKS AT HER ENCHANTED WHILE SHE CHATTERS ON.)

DAISY

I wish we had steamers like this in America.

WINTERBOURNE

Well what about on the Mississippi?

DAISY

I don't live near the Mississippi

## Interactive Game Script (This is one Type of Interactive Script)

(Reproduced with permission of Screenplay Systems Movie Magic Scriptwriter.)

### **ROCKY COURTYARD**

It is a rock-hewn courtyard, old and decaying, but clearly having once been elegant.

To the north is the imposing edifice of a temple, to the west is a gaping chasm, completely impassible.

South of us is a gate, an apple orchard just beyond it.

**GO TO GATE (2)**

**GO TO TEMPLE (3)**

**GO TO CHASM (4)**

**ORCHARD GATE**

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IF YOU TRY TO OPEN THE GATE THEN
  IF YOU HAVE THE <KEY TO THE ORCHARD GATE> THEN
    The gate creaks open.
    GO TO ORCHARD (5)
  OTHERWISE
    The gates rattle but you can't get through.
  ENDIF
ENDIF
GO TO ROCKY COURTYARD (1)
```

**TEMPLE**

The temple is elegant, bas-relief images of strange animals covering the walls.

You can go around the temple to the left or right.

```
GO TO RIGHT AROUND TEMPLE (7)
GO TO LEFT AROUND TEMPLE (6)
```

**CHASM**

An uncrossable chasm at your feet.

```
  IF YOU JUMP THEN
    GO TO YOU'RE DEAD (16)
  END IF
GO TO ROCKY COURTYARD (1)
```

**ORCHARD**

Congratulations! You're in. Eat an apple while you're here.

```
GO TO ORCHARD GATE (2)
```

**LEFT AROUND TEMPLE**

Broken columns litter your path as you walk around the temple, finally opening up and leaving you at the inner buildings.

```
GO TO INNER BUILDINGS (8)
```

**RIGHT AROUND TEMPLE**

Broken columns litter your path as you walk around the Temple. Midway around, you'll find an open door.

```
  IF YOU ENTER THE DOOR THEN
    GO TO TEMPLE ROOM (13)
  ENDIF
```

The Walkway continues around finally opening up and leaving you at the inner building

**GO TO INNER BUILDINGS (8)**

**INNER BUILDINGS**

IF <CLOCK IS SET> THEN

**GO TO BACK OF TEMPLE (10)**

ENDIF

A large ornate door blocks your way, a lion headed knocker on the front door.

IF YOU USE THE KNOCKER THEN

It hits the door with a loud booming sound, but no one opens it.

END IF

IF YOU LOOK UP THEN

You will see more carvings and a sign over the door, held up by two clocks.

IF YOU EXAMINE THE SIGN THEN YOU'VE <EXAMINED  
SIGN> AND

It says:

When time and place are correct, then the doors to opportunity will open.

END IF

IF YOU HAVE <EXAMINED SIGN> AND YOU CLIMB UP  
THEN

You can reach the two clocks.

IF YOU SET THE TWO CLICK HANDS TO BOTH POINT  
AT THE DOOR THEN THE <CLOCK IS SET> AND

The door opens silently.

**GO TO HALLWAY OF INNER BUILDINGS (9)**

**GO TO BACK OF TEMPLE (10)**

ENDIF

ENDIF

ENDIF

**GO TO BACK OF TEMPLE (10)**

**HALLWAY OF INNER BUILDING**

It's a long hallway, water on the floor.

There is a door to the right of you.

IF YOU TRY AND OPEN DOOR THEN

it creaks open.

**GO TO LIBRARY (14)**

ENDIF

the hallway extends to an inner courtyard

**GO TO INNER COURTYARD (15)**

**GO TO INNER BUILDINGS (8)**

#### **BACK OF TEMPLE**

More bas-relief, these even weirder. From here you can go either left or right around the temple.

**GO TO INNER BUILDINGS (8)**

**GO TO RIGHT AROUND TEMPLE II (11)**

**GO TO LEFT AROUND TEMPLE II (12)**

#### **RIGHT AROUND TEMPLE II**

Broken columns litter your path as you walk around the Temple, finally opening up and leaving you at the rocky Courtyard.

**GO TO ROCKY COURTYARD (1)**

#### **LEFT AROUND TEMPLE II**

Broken columns litter your path as you walk around the temple. Midway around, you'll find an open door.

IF YOU ENTER THE DOOR THEN

**GO TO TEMPLE ROOM (13)**

ENDIF

The walkway continues around finally opening up and leaving you at the rocky courtyard.

**GO TO ROCKY COURTYARD (1)**

#### **TEMPLE ROOM**

A small temple, long pews on either side.

An OLD PRIEST stands with his back to you at the alter, mumbling something in what sounds like Latin.

IF YOU SPEAK TO HIM THEN

PRIEST

(without turning)

Go away!

IF YOU CONTINUE TRYING TO TALK TO HIM THEN

```
                PRIEST (CONT'D)
                (still without turning)
If you value your soul, then turn back before it's too late . . . go,
leave me!
```

```
                ENDIF
```

```
                ENDIF
```

```
IF YOU WALK UP TO THE PRIEST THEN
```

```
He turns, and you see that he's quite dead, maggots crawling in
what's left of his face . . . he lunges for you and you quickly
join his condition . . .
```

```
    GO TO YOU'RE DEAD (16)
```

```
                ENDIF
```

```
    GO TO RETURN (0)
```

#### LIBRARY

```
Lots of books and a large key on the table.
```

```
    IF YOU TAKE KEY THEN YOU HAVE <KEY TO THE
    ORCHARD GATE>.
```

```
    GO TO RETURN (0)
```

#### INNER COURTYARD

```
Lots of cool statues.
```

```
    GO TO HALLWAY OF INNER BUILDING (9)
```

#### YOU'RE DEAD

```
That's it!
```

## Video Game Concept for *Gods & Monsters*

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### *Premise*

The story of two brothers, Telamon and Peleus, who were friends of Heracles, voyagers on the Argo and enemies of the goddess Athena. Quest-based gameplay in which the player controls Telamon to fight, but Peleus fights alongside using unique combat mechanics. Together they combine talents to defeat armies and mythic creatures. After playing Telamon and Peleus' story, more quests become

unlocked telling tales of different pairs of heroes (e.g. Heracles, Jason etc.). All heroes can be powered up by an RPG-style mechanic.

### Mechanics

#### Controls

PS2	XBox	Meaning	Notes
X	A	Attack	Can press up to four times for a sequence of attacks
O	B	Power	Used with direction push to dive, flip etc Used with Attack to access special attacks
□ △	X Y	Shoot Arrow -	If locked on, fires at target <i>Currently unused</i>
L1 or L2	L	Lock On	When held, locks player onto target enemy If no other button pressed, automatically blocks
R1 or R2	R	Call to Partner	Changes between Open, Co-op and Guard

#### Attacks & Special Attacks

The player's first three attacks (on the Attack button) come in quick succession; the fourth is more powerful, but much slower. The most efficient way to attack is therefore to get the rhythm of the first three attacks and never trigger the fourth (a standard fighting game mechanic).

Special attacks can be pressed by using the Power button after a different number of Attacks (A = attack button, P = power button, + = 'then press...'):

- **P:** if Power is used without a direction (or when pressing forwards), causes a jumping weapon attack carrying the player forward a short distance.
- **A + P:** power blow, that knocks back opponent a short distance
- **A + P + P:** as above, but followed by the jumping attack to close distance
- **A + A + P:** wide arc attack clears surrounding opponents (low damage)
- **A + A + A + P:** crushing blow, which can stagger opponent and lower their shield

These different combinations are simple to enter, and hence 'button mashing' still produces useful actions.

## Locking On

Holding the Left trigger locks on to an opponent in the front arc. In this mode, the player can use all of the attacks they can use when unlocked, plus they can press Shoot to fire an arrow at their opponent.

## Partner Trigger

When the Right trigger is pressed, the player's hero calls out to their partner for help. The partner switches between three contexts:

- **Open:** partner chooses own targets, staying within about 20 m radius of player.
- **Guard:** partner stands back-to-back with player to protect their rear
- **Co-op:** partner attacks the same target as the player, using co-operative attack.

Which context the partners goes into depends upon the circumstances, using a highly intuitive system which can easily be learned experientially:

<i>Final Context</i>		
<i>Current Context</i>	If no enemy locked	If enemy locked on (L-trigger held)
Open	→ Guard	If enemies in rear arc, → Guard Else, → Co-op
Guard	→ Open	→ Co-op
Co-op	If enemies in rear arc, → Guard Else, → Open	If enemies in rear arc, → Guard Else, → Open

Informally, when unlocked, pressing Partner trigger switches between Open and Guard. When locked on, pressing Partner trigger switches between Open and Co-op.

If the player is being attacked from behind, pressing Partner trigger instead switches to Guard.

## Armour

To help build atmosphere, the player's state of health is shown visually, by their armour. As they take damage, they lose items of armour. First, they lose their shoulder plate (75% Armour), then their breastplate (50% Armour), then finally their helmet (25% Armour). From 24 to 1% armour they are down to just a loincloth. At 0%, they are dead.

Their partner also has armour, *but cannot be killed*. Instead, when their armour runs out they automatically go into Guard position (the safest position).

### *The Legends*

Initially, only Telamon & Peleus can be played, but the other legends unlock progressively:

- 1 **Telamon & Peleus:** the two brothers travel on the Argo, until Heracles leaves the voyage, and ultimately face off against the daughters of Medusa.
- 2 **Atalanta & Jason:** the first half of the story of the Argonauts, told from the perspective of Greece's legendary female warrior, Atalanta, who is partnered here with Jason.
- 3 **Jason & Medea:** the second half of the story of the Argonauts, as Jason returns to Greece with the Golden Fleece, partnered with his new wife, the sorceress Medea.
- 4 **Peleus & Heracles:** the tale of five of the twelve labours of Hercules (Heracles), told from the perspective of his friend Peleus, who helped him on several labours.
- 5 **Theseus & Telamon:** the legendary story of Theseus and the Minotaur, with Telamon partnering Theseus.
- 6 **Medea & Atlanta:** as Jason betrays Medea, she seeks revenge upon him, and partners with Atalanta for her own legend.
- 7 **Heracles & Theseus:** the story of mighty Heracles is concluded, with him partnered with his cousin and admirer, Theseus. Ultimately, Heracles ascends to Olympus as a god.

### *The Quests*

As well as the seven story-driven Legends above, the player can also complete seven quests – one for every hero. This is carried out in Quest Mode, in which the player can take any pair of heroes into any of the game levels. Each hero can acquire a mythic item (the Silver Bow of Artemis, Zeus' Thunderbolt, the Helm of Hades, the Winged Sandals of Hermes etc.) by completing a series of challenges which are 'hidden' in the levels, but marked with the seal of the hero's patron god. The hero then uses the item to complete a final challenge.

For example, Medea's quest begins when her patron deity, Hecate, orders her to acquire the head of one of the daughters of Medusa. To do this, she must find where the Adamantium Sickle is held (the only weapon strong enough to cut off the head), and also acquire the Kibisis Pouch (which can hold the head safely). Only when she has found, and defeated the guardians of, these items, can she go to the daughters of the Medusa and get a Gorgon's head. Then, Hecate sends her into the Underworld to 'rescue' Persephone from Hades, using the Gorgon's head to turn her enemies to stone.

These quests provide a reuse of resources at very little cost, and provide an extended play window, extending the value of word-of-mouth and other consumer-lead market effects. Additionally, the player receives a letter grade (Epsilon, Delta, Gamma, Beta, Alpha or Omega) for each level in Quest Mode, allowing hardcore players to strive to get Omega on every level.

### *Gameplay Example*

This is set in the first Legend, Telamon & Peleus, during the part of the voyage of the Argo when these two heroes were aboard. The player is Telamon; Peleus is their partner.

The Argo has set ashore on the Arcton peninsula, en route to the Black Sea and Colchis (where the Golden Fleece is held). Desperately short of food, all the Argonauts are told to go out seeking supplies. Telamon briefly talks to Heracles, whom both he and Peleus have befriended. He tells them that the Arcton peninsula is notoriously home to certain Earth-born giants with a bad reputation. Heracles asks the two heroes to take care, and heads off on his own.

Telamon and Peleus talk amongst themselves as they head out into the peninsula – their conversation is ended by unintelligible talking from a ridge nearby. A short engine cut shows the group of six-armed nine-foot tall giants on the other side of the ridge.

The heroes engage. At first, Telamon wades into open combat (Peleus picks his own targets), but the enemy is strong. Soon, Telamon is surrounded. He tries a wide-arc attack to throw them off, then hits his trigger to call to Peleus (“I need some help here!”). Because there are enemies in Telamon’s rear arc, Peleus rushes to fight back to back, guarding Telamon’s back.

They cut the group down to just two opponents, but another giant arrives. This one is twelve feet tall, and is dressed in black armour – the leader of this group. Telamon hits his trigger to free up Peleus (“Go get them. . .”), and then locks onto the leader of the group. He starts hitting, but the giant’s defence is too strong, and it keeps using a shield to block.

Telamon decides to take out the grunts first, then deal with the leader. Still locked, he hits his trigger to assign Peleus to that target (“Keep the leader busy for me!”), putting Peleus in Co-op mode, then releases the lock trigger (Peleus continues attacking the leader).

Locking onto a distant foe that Peleus has already reduced to just a helm, Telamon hits his arrow button repeatedly and the giant falls down dead – but as he does the other giant hits him and sends him flying. He loses his breastplate – he’s down to 50% Armour. He’s scored a 3-hit combo at the moment from the arrows, and Peleus hits the giant leader 4 times, extending this combo to 7 while the player while gets their bearings.

Quickly locking onto the last grunt before the combo fades, he starts hitting it just in time to continue the combo. Because a second opponent has been added to the combo, a x2 appears by the combo count, and after 8 hits (15 hits total) the giant falls.

The player locks back onto the leader (combo x3), but as he does, Peleus' last piece of armour is removed – Peleus falls into Guard (“I can't hold him any longer”). Telamon will have to defeat the giant on his own. After another 4 hits, the player is knocked back and with Peleus in Guard mode, the combo is broken at  $19 \times 3 = 57$ . The player's helm is knocked off – they only have 25% Armour left.

Falling back a safe distance, the player locks on and lets loose with arrows. Although Peleus is in Guard, Telamon hits trigger to toggle Peleus into Co-op...since Peleus cannot leave the Guard position without getting some armour, this causes Peleus to shoot arrows to defend Telamon – so the two unleash a rain of arrows together. The giant leader falls, and the highest combo score of the battle (57) is used to upgrade the loot – which includes full armour and a big plus to Attack.

The two carry on, and come to a flock of sheep. Perfect food for the voyage! Telamon tries to grab one, but they run away too fast. Flipping into Co-op (“Help me corner one of these damn sheep!”), the two co-operate to bring down the sheep. They round up the last few with arrows, leaving a dead flock and mutton for all.

The camera pans back to a nearby ridge. From behind it can be see a smooth mound, which rises upwards... then higher... and higher... until a huge thirty foot tall Cyclops shepherd can be seen towering angrily above it's now slaughtered flock!

Telamon locks on, and triggers Peleus into Co-op (“Try and hit its skullcap!”). Peleus begins hitting the Cyclops' skullcap (a context-specified behaviour in this case), which partly covers the single eye. When he does, the shepherd stops briefly to readjust its position. Telamon times his shot perfectly and an arrow pierces the Cyclops' eye, blinding it! The giant comes falls to its hands and knees and begins groping after the two heroes in a blind panic. The adventure continues...

### Notes

#### How does the game emotionally involve the player?

- “Buddy movie” stories following the adventures of various pairings of heroes
- Vivid, believable recreation of mythic Greece (rather than over-the-top fantasy)
- RPG structure immerses player as they work to ‘power up’ their heroes
- Strong non-linear interconnections between the stories (“Mythological *Pulp Fiction*”)
- Later quests relate to the relationships between the heroes

#### How does the game function as wish-fulfillment?

- Player engages in larger-than-life heroics
- Epic quest format
- Player is immersed in famous mythology

### How does the game appeal to the hardcore gamer?

- Multi-level controls allows hardcore players to perfect ‘advanced’ combat techniques (earning greater rewards in terms of character advancement by using combos to ‘upgrade’ power ups)
- RPG-style format popular with hardcore
- “Fantasy” settings popular with hardcore
- Constant unlocking of materials (new heroes, then mythic items) forms addictive motivating factor

### How does the game appeal to the casual gamer?

- Easy controls, allows the player to “button-mash” and still progress
- RPG format allows less-expert players to “level up” to tackle tougher quests
- Immersive mechanics (very little displayed as HUD overlays) builds atmosphere
- Quasi-historical setting provides easy identification with game world

### Market notes

- Greek monsters are the most recognizable mythic creatures in the West and are perennially popular (especially amongst young males)
- *Shin Sangoku Musou* (*Dynasty Warriors* in the West) series succeeded incredibly in the Japanese market (top five sales positions) by drawing on an identifiable mythology – the Three Kingdoms. (This Three Kingdoms setting is extremely famous and popular in Japan and China). *Gods & Monsters* presents a Westernized version of this approach, using a recognizable Western mythology as the basis for the game.
- Multi-character progression (through reuse of materials in new story contexts) creates longer play window for hardcore players, resulting in longer shelf life and greater capacity to cross over into the casual audience.

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## Glossary of Terms, Abbreviations and Acronyms

Note: Most camera, audio, and graphics terms can be found on the DVD where the definition is linked to stills or video that illustrate what the term means.

**AI:** Artificial intelligence is the programmed characteristics of behavior and response of a non-human character.

**ANTAGONIST:** Derived from the Greek word *agon*, meaning action, and refers to the character who is the adversary or opponent of the PROTAGONIST.

**AVATAR:** the character that you control in the game or that you create in a multiplayer game.

**BACK STORY:** Refers to the life and background of a character that does not appear in the film or TV episode but that explains who the person is and why he or she is that way. Back story is usually written up for a series or video game BIBLE.

**BCU (BIG CLOSE-UP) or ECU (EXTREME CLOSE-UP):** A big close-up or extreme close-up frames the head so that the top of frame clips the forehead or hairline and the bottom of frame clips the neck.

**BIBLE:** Combined with the word “series” or “video game,” refers to a substantial compilation of BACK STORIES and includes explanation of the setting, world, characters, and story background for the benefit of all writers and creative talent involved.

**BEAT:** A scriptwriting term written in caps to indicate a wait or a PAUSE in the delivery of dialogue. It implies a reaction or when some business intervenes between lines of dialogue.

**BEAT SHEET:** A scriptwriting term associated with television writing for series, which often substitutes for a TREATMENT, and which outlines the numbered scenes or sequences for an episode.

**CG (CHARACTER GENERATOR):** The electronic text composing device that is the most downstream device in a television switcher before program. In video postproduction, a character generator is now integrated with desktop editors. See TITLES.

**CONCEPT:** The first formal document you create in the script writing process is called a concept. It is also sometimes called an outline. Whatever you call it, its function is the same, namely, to set down in writing the key ideas and vision of the program. This document is written in conventional prose. There is no special format for it. It does not cover all the plot or content; nor does it include dialogue or voice narration. It is primarily an idea in a nutshell from which the script in all its detail will grow.

**COVER:** A director must shoot the same SCENE from several different camera set-ups, so that action and dialogue are repeated, or covered, in different camera angles in order for the editor to cut between them and create continuity from shot to shot within a scene. Without such cover, a scene cannot be edited.

**CRANE:** A crane shot is made by raising or lowering a camera platform usually with a crane or boom. It could also be achieved with a helicopter mounted camera at great expense. In a low-budget production, a smaller scale crane effect can be done handheld by bending and straightening the knees while handholding the camera.

**CU (CLOSE-UP):** A close-up frames the head and shoulders leaving head-room above the head. A close-up is a way to frame the face or to highlight detail of inanimate objects.

**CUT-SCENES:** Live or computer-generated videos clips, usually not interactive, interludes between stages that furnish additional information, such as story elements, tips, tricks or secrets.

**DENOUEMENT:** A French word meaning, literally, unknitting, that refers to the resolution of the basic conflict that drives a story.

**DEPTH-OF-FIELD:** This is a function of the focal length of the lens, the f-stop setting, and the shutter speed, usually fixed in film at a 1/48<sup>th</sup> of a second and in video at 1/30<sup>th</sup> of a second. Shutter angles can be varied on professional cameras to a small degree that changes exposure.

**DESIGN DOCUMENT:** A written exposition of the nature of the content and the visual style of interactive media such as websites, CD-ROMs or Video Games.

**DISSOLVE/MIX:** In film production, anything other than a cut has to be created in the optical printer from A and B roll offsets. The editor marks up the film so that the lab technician can move the printer from the outgoing shot on the A roll to the incoming shot on the B roll. In video, the mix is made with a fader bar that diminishes input from one video source as a second is added. In the middle of a dissolve, when fifty percent of the printer light or video source comes from each picture, a temporary effect called a **SUPERIMPOSITION** occurs. This effect is now created digitally within nonlinear editors.

**DOLLY:** A dolly shot is similar to a tracking shot in that the camera platform moves, but it moves toward or away from the subject so that the frame size gets larger or smaller.

**DOUBLE-TAKE:** Like many comic devices, the double-take is a compact with the audience. The character takes an extra long time to react to a put down or before delivering a reply. Although it can be an acting technique, it is also very much a comic effect that can be written into a script. It needs the right line or situation with an indication in the script. You do this by writing **PAUSE**, **BEAT**, or **DOUBLE-TAKE**.

**DUB:** Used as both a noun and a verb, the term refers to the copying of an electronic signal, both audio and video, or either by itself, from one source to a new tape, disk, or new location on a tape or disk.

**DUAL COLUMN FORMAT:** This refers to a script lay out in which all action is described in the left hand column, and all audio is described in the right hand column.

**DVE (DIGITAL VIDEO EFFECT):** Transitions between shots have become so numerous because of the advent of DVEs in computer based editors and mixers that it would be impossible to list the dozens of different patterns and effects. Once again, this is the province of postproduction unless you have a very strong reason to incorporate a specific visual effect into your script.

**ENGINE:** The application that powers a game. One primary engine (the graphics engine) and several smaller engines power AI and sound. People refer to the whole product as the engine.

**ESTABLISHING SHOT:** This **SHOT** establishes the setting and the dramatic components of the **SCENE**.

**EXT. (EXTERIOR):** This is the standard abbreviation for an exterior (or outside) setting used in the **SLUG LINE** of a script.

**FADE IN:** Almost all audio events are faded in and faded out to avoid the snap cut to music or effects at full level. This also permits us to use music cues that do not necessarily correspond to the beginning and end of a piece.

**FADE IN FROM BLACK:** All programs begin with this effect that is simply a mix from black to picture. Sometimes you might write in this effect to mark a break in time or sections of a program.

**FADE OUT:** This is the audio cue that most people forget to use. They fade in music or effects and then forget to indicate where the audio event ends. The fade out eases out the sound so that an abrupt cut off or stop does not shock the ear or draw attention to itself. Many commercial recordings of popular music are faded out at the end.

**FADE OUT TO BLACK:** All programs end with this effect that is a mix from picture to black, the opposite of the fade in from black. Logically, these two fade effects go in pairs.

**FADE UNDER:** Fading an audio event such as music under is necessary when you want the event to continue but not compete with a new event that will mix from another track—typically dialogue or commentary. These decisions are largely made by audio mixers and editors. Nevertheless, you should know these terms for the rare occasion when you need to lock in a specific audio idea in your script.

**FINAL DRAFT SCRIPT:** This is the final document that incorporates all the revisions and input of the client or producer and all the improvements and finishing touches that a writer gives to the writing job even when not explicitly asked for. A scriptwriter, like all writers, looks at his work with a critical eye and seeks constant improvement. This document should mark the end of the writer's task and the completion of any contractual arrangement.

**FIRST DRAFT SCRIPT:** This is the initial attempt to transpose the content of the treatment into a screenplay or script format appropriate to the medium. This is the cross-over from prose writing to script writing in which all the special conventions of camera and scene description are used. The layout of the page serves the special job of communicating action, camera angles, and audio to a production team. It is the idea of the program formulated as a blueprint for production. The producer, the client, and the director get their first chance to read a total account for every scene from beginning to end.

**FIRST-PERSON:** In video games, means you see the action through the eyes of your characters. You don't see your own body.

**FLASHBACK/FLASH FORWARD:** These terms refer to a narrative device that both writers and editors use to manage the relationship of different moments of time in a dramatic story.

**FRAME:** The borders of the images or picture which corresponds to the area seen in a viewfinder.

**GRAPHICS:** This refers to content created either as flat artwork, or more usually, a computer generated frame, with or without animation, in either 2-D or 3-D. (See DVD)

**HIGH ANGLE:** A high angle means pointing the camera lens down to an object or a person.

**HIGH LEVEL DESIGN:** Refers to a comprehensive description of the content, style, and look of interactive media such as a video game, a website, or a CD-ROM.

**HUD:** A heads up display is used most in first person games, the heads up display, like a flight deck or a dashboard, presents information on the screen, such as the life meter, level, weapons, ammunition, map, etc.

**INT. (INTERIOR):** This is the standard abbreviation for an interior (or inside) setting used in the SLUG LINE of a script.

**ISOMETRIC VIEW:** A view of a video game and its action from an angle instead of directly from above or directly from the side.

**LIBRARY MUSIC:** Library music is sold by needle time for specific synchronization rights for designated territories and is generally recorded without fades so that the audio mixer of a program can make the decisions about the length of fades. This music is recorded in convenient lengths of 30 and 60 seconds, as well as longer pieces with variations on the same basic theme so that the piece can be reprised at different moments on the sound track. Also small music bridges and riffs and teasers are available off the shelf for editors and audio mixers to use.

**LOW ANGLE:** A low angle means pointing the camera lens up to a subject whether an object or a person.

**LOG LINE:** A log line is a short sentence or even a phrase that rests on the premise of a film and captures its essential idea.

**LS (LONG SHOT):** A long shot should include the whole human figure from head to foot so that this figure or figures are featured rather than the background.

**MASTER SCENE SCRIPT:** The standard form of the SCREENPLAY for feature film is sometimes referred to by this name because each SCENE is usually the description of an action from which a MASTER SHOT will come.

**MASTER SHOT:** This is a camera SHOT that captures the whole scene and its dialogue in one single shot or TAKE. The standard practice of directors is to shoot a master and then COVER it with other angles of the same action and dialogue.

**MONTAGE:** A montage is an assembly of shots that have no intrinsic continuity and no necessary relation to one another other than their function in the montage created by the editor. The term comes from the French *monter*, meaning to edit.

**MORPHING:** This refers to a computer generated effect that makes one shape or object metamorphose into, or transform into another object unlike the first. For example, a human face changes into an animal face.

**MS (MEDIUM SHOT):** A medium shot allows headroom at the top of frame and puts the bottom of frame either above or below the waist. Keeping the hands in is one way to visualize the shot. It is definitely well above the knees.

**MMORPG (MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME), MMP or MMO (Massively Multiplayer Online):** An online game which allows players to interact with a large number of other players in a real-time virtual environment.

**MUD (MULTI-USER DOMAIN):** A website which hosts multiple players logged on to play one another. An example is a chat room for text-based games.

**MUSIC:** A music track is created independently of production. Music videos begin with a defined sound track. Other programs have music added in post-production to fit dialogue, sound effects, and mood. The writer does not usually pick music nor decide where music is necessary. The exception is where the music is integral to the idea, or in a short script such as a PSA in which detailed conception might include ideas for music. If you do write in music cues there is a correct way to do it.

**NAVIGATION:** refers to the way in which a user can travel around a website or choose interactive hyperlinks to discover the in-depth layers of a site or CD-ROM or DVD.

**OVER-THE-SHOULDER:** This shot, as the name implies, frames two figures so that one is partially in frame quarter back view at one side while the other is featured three quarter front view. This shot is usually matched to a reverse angle of the same figures so that the values are reversed.

**PAN (PANORAMA):** The most common movement of the camera. A pan can move from left to right, or vice versa, hence, sweeping across a scene to give a panoramic view. The most common use of this camera movement is to follow action while the camera platform remains stationary.

**PITCH/PITCHING:** Pitching is talking, not writing. It is the verbal communicating and selling of ideas in the media industries. You have to talk your ideas as well as write them down. To make a living as a writer, you often have

to sell your ideas in meetings. The good pitch should capture the essential idea in a nutshell and tease the listener so that he is motivated to read what you have written.

**PLATFORM:** The type of system a game is played on such as PlayStation 2, Xbox, Game Boy and GameCube.

**PLATFORM GAME:** Such a game involves jumping on platforms of various sizes and jumping on enemies to destroy them.

**POSTPRODUCTION:** Refers to all the activities that follow shooting such as editing, post-synching, music recording, titling, and mastering that lead to a completed program or SHOW PRINT.

**PREMISE:** This term refers to a compact statement of the essential idea of a movie or program. It embodies the essential conflict or dilemma that will drive the plot and the characters.

**PREPRODUCTION:** This refers to all the activities before shooting that turn a script into a production. During this stage, scripts are broken down, scheduled, budgeted, crewed-up, and cast.

**PROTAGONIST:** A protagonist is the main character, whose actions and choices determine the story, e.g. Hamlet the character in the Shakespeare play.

**PSA:** The acronym stands for Public Service Announcement, which is like a TV commercial that communicates a message on behalf of a non-profit organization or government agency with a message intended for the public good.

**PULL FOCUS/RACK FOCUS:** Pulling or racking focus refers to a deliberate change of focus executed by twisting the focus ring on the barrel of a lens. This technique is typically used to shift attention from one character to another when they are speaking and the depth-of-field is insufficient to hold both in focus at the same time. It is commonly used in television drama and movies.

**REVERSE ANGLE:** A reverse angle is one of a typical pairing of two matched shots with converging eyelines. They can be MEDIUM SHOTS, CLOSE-UPS, or OVER-THE-SHOULDER shots and are shot from two separate camera setups.

**RPG:** A role-playing game is a genre of game for both PCs and consoles in which the player develops intelligence and skills by collecting points and solving puzzles.

**RUNNING GAG:** A running gag depends on repetition. It keeps running. The premise of the gag is known to the audience so that each new exploitation

of the gag gets a rise from the previous one. You keep going back to the same premise to work it from another angle. A lot of comedy is enriched by this device.

**SCENE:** The scene is the basic unit of visual narrative for the SCREENPLAY. It has unity of time and place. A new scene begins when either time or place changes.

**SCENE OUTLINE:** This term refers to a way a writer might compose a visual narrative by listing SCENES rather than writing a TREATMENT.

**SCREENPLAY:** A screenplay or script is the translation of the TREATMENT into a visual blueprint for production laying end to end the particular scenes employing the specific descriptive language of the medium to describe what is to be seen on the screen and heard on the sound track. This means the action and its background and each new character in the SCENE must be delineated. Every word of dialogue intended to be spoken must be written down. Every SCENE must be described.

**SCRIPT:** A script is the final document that details the scenes that make up the narrative of a film or program. It describes action and provides the dialogue to be spoken and is laid out in a format according to the convention of the medium. MASTER SCENE SCRIPT or SCREENPLAY is appropriate to film, and a DUAL COLUMN FORMAT is appropriate to documentary or corporate programs.

**SCRIPT BREAKDOWN:** This is an analysis of the elements of a script by reference to location, cast, props, costumes and so on that enables the producer to find the most efficient order for shooting the script in a Shooting Schedule.

**SEGUE TO:** This term means to cross fade two audio events. It is the audio equivalent of the video mix. You do not need to write this into the audio side of a script every time you use a MIX TO transition. It is understood by all involved that one goes with the other.

**SEQUENCE:** This term refers to a coherent section of visual narrative that might be composed of several SCENES or several shots in the case of a long SCENE.

**SET UP:** This refers to the placement of a camera in a specific place and with a specific focal length lens to shoot a SHOT.

**SFX (SOUND EFFECTS):** Instead of describing a thunderstorm and the sound of thunder at length, it is sufficient to write, "SFX thunder." In postproduction, whoever assumes responsibility for the audio tracks will pull a stock effect from a bank of effects on a CD-ROM, or audio tape. A sound effect is anything other than speech or music.

**SHOOTER:** A game in which the object is to kill an enemy with a weapon that fires bullets or rays while avoiding being shot by the adversaries. Such games are usually constructed in a 3D environment, assume a first-person perspective and are referred to as FPS or “first-person shooters.”

**SHOOTING SCRIPT:** A writer builds a SCREENPLAY out of scenes, which is its fundamental building block. The director has to compose a SCENE out of shots. This means a director has to create a SHOOTING SCRIPT out of a SCREENPLAY. The director has both the right and the responsibility to break down the SCENE into camera set-ups or shots that will COVER the action of the SCENE.

**SHOT:** A shot describes the way a lens produces an image. It frames the subject in the viewfinder and is usually defined in two dimensions by how much or little of the human figure is included in the frame. It also has a third dimension that is defined by the foreground and background in the frame. How much of this third dimension is in focus depends on the DEPTH-OF-FIELD. See also PULL FOCUS/RACK FOCUS. The shot is the basic unit of narrative for the camera and for the director who shoots the movie. A shot can also be defined as the smallest unit of uninterrupted live action in the finished program.

**SHOT LIST:** This list consists of the SHOTS that are revealed by a SCRIPT. **BREAKDOWN:** It can be a list of shots that a director visualizes to shoot a SCENE, or it can be a way for a writer to compose a SEQUENCE or outline a SCENE.

**SHOW PRINT:** A print or dub from an edit master that embodies the finished program as it will be distributed.

**SLUG LINE:** A slug line is the accepted convention for summarizing the technical information that defines the place and time of a scene.

**SUPERIMPOSITION:** A superimposition (or SUPER as an instruction) is simply the mix or dissolve mixed into the midprinter light or midfader position and then out. Beginners often go to unnecessary lengths to describe the way titles superimpose on picture or a background. A sentence can be reduced to: *SUPER TITLES over black*, or *SUPER TITLES over LS of street*, or *SUPER name under CU of face*.

**TAG LINE:** a phrase or sentence that invites you into the world of the movie and is usually part of the publicity for launching and selling the film. (i.e., *In space, nobody can hear you scream*).

**TAKE:** This refers to the discrete recording or filming of a shot from a given SETUP. More than one take may be shot from the same SETUP in order to correct technical or performance errors.

**THIRD-PERSON:** An omniscient point of view in a video game that lets you see the character you are controlling in contrast to **FIRST PERSON**.

**THROUGHLINE:** A scriptwriting term that refers to the comprehensible story thread discernible in the events or actions of the character or plot.

**TILT:** Tilt is a movement of the camera platform to angle up or angle down in a continuous movement along a vertical axis. It is useful for following movement. Panning and tilting are often combined in one movement to follow motion in three dimensions.

**TITLES:** A title is created either in a **CHARACTER GENERATOR** or as part of computer graphic imaging. It is part of postproduction and needs to be identified by another **SLUG LINE** separate from a **SHOT** or a **SCENE**. You can indicate this by a simple slug: **TITLE** or **CG**.

**TRACK:** A track refers to a continuous movement of the camera platform in one direction, usually alongside an action or moving figure. This is accomplished by putting the camera on a dolly that runs on tracks or by handholding the camera while walking alongside the action. This enables the camera to make a shot that maintains a constant frame around a moving object or person. The camera platform can also be mounted on a vehicle or any other moving object.

**TREATMENT:** After the **CONCEPT** comes the treatment. Both these terms are universally used and understood. A writer must know what they are and how to write them. Writing the treatment involves expanding the concept to reveal the complete structure of the program with the basic content or storyline arranged in the order that will prevail in the final script. All characters and principal scenes should be introduced. Although this document is still written in normal prose, it frequently introduces key moments of voice narration or dramatic dialogue.

**TWO SHOT:** Although this is not an abbreviation, it is a common term that describes two people in **CLOSE-UP** or **MEDIUM SHOT**. The wide screen format of the movie screen and the new **HDTV** television format make good use of this frame.

**VLS (VERY LONG SHOT):** There is no precise definition about what is very long other than that it should include the whole human figure, the whole action, and a good view of the background.

**VOICE-OVER:** This is the recorded voice of a commentary that is laid on a separate audio track. On-camera narration can also be run as voice over with **B-roll** picture.

**WIDE ANGLE:** This term is somewhat loose. It generally means a **LONG SHOT** or an establishing shot that shows the whole scene.

**WIPE:** A wipe is the effect of an incoming image pushing off the outgoing image. A wipe is more commonly a video effect. Every mixer has a number of standard wipe patterns. The most obvious are a horizontal and a vertical wipe in which the two images are separated by a line. The other basic patterns are circle wipes and rectangle wipes in which the incoming image grows from a point in the middle of the outgoing picture as an expanding shape. A scriptwriter should think very carefully before writing in such detailed transitions. Leave it to the director and editor in postproduction.

**ZOOM:** A zoom is an optical effect created by changing the focal length during a SHOT in a specially designed lens that has a variable focal length. The effect makes the frame larger or smaller like a DOLLY SHOT. The important difference is that a dolly shot maintains the focal length and depth of field throughout, and the camera moves nearer or farther away. The zoom uses an optical effect without moving the camera to change from a wide angle lens to a telephoto lens so that it appears to the viewer that the subject is closer or farther away.

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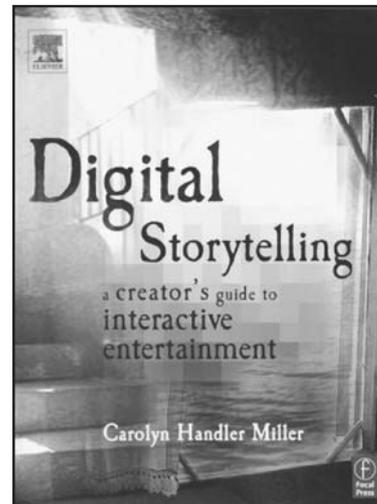
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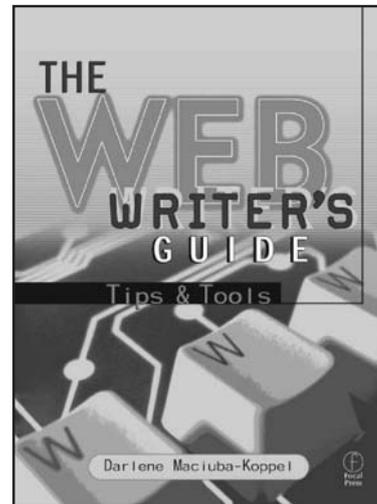
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