



Script Nurse

Screenwriters
Conference
Center

- <http://scriptnurse.com>

Improving your Screenplay

Script Nurse on Character Development:

Write back stories for your characters. Create their past lives and family history. Note their quirks, habits (good and bad), flaws, compulsions, fears, phobias, dark secrets, things that scare them in the night and make a list of every skeleton in their closet. Write down traits others might see as good, redeeming and to be admired. List things that make them likeable. It helps you understand them. It makes them "real." Creating a past lets you create a future that's real and plausible. Having this understanding leads to you knowing that a character would or wouldn't "do that" or "say that."

But...

- This is fine, but don't go overboard. Feel free to write a back story for your characters, but bear in mind it won't be marked, nor should it appear too much in your script. It may help you with the development, but you are writing an extract, rather than a whole screenplay. Visual storytelling is better to get across.

Script Nurse on Character Development:

- Try "casting" your script with a dream cast. Cast each principal role with the biggest name you can think of who is perfect for the part. See that \$20 Million Star being the character you're writing. Get photos of them and stick them up on a wall with their character name above the photo. When you've got Jack Nicholson speaking your lines, you find out very quickly the kinds of things he simply could not do or would not say.

A good idea: Most dialogue is awful. If you have an actor in mind as you write, it may help you to 'hear' the character's voice and importantly, 'hear' what sounds wrong.

Some examples from a long list of character traits that you could get across visually:

- Fiddles with glasses when talking.
- Strokes head when thinking.
- Smiles nervously when pausing in a conversation.
- Absently bounces leg while sitting.
- Constantly cracks knuckles, back, and/or joints.
- Stutters when excited
- Nervous laugh before talking
- Chases dogs with electrical appliances.

Real vs. Reel Dialogue

- There's real dialogue and "reel" dialogue. If you want real dialogue, just go outside, where there's plenty of it. Reel dialogue in film is different. It's terse and more direct without being "in your face." Here's where reading good, quality scripts can really help you.

Rule of Thumb: In a properly formatted script, if there are more than five lines of dialogue under a character name, it's starting to become a speech. Too many speeches and your script is too "talky."

Strike every "well," "now," "listen," "oh," etc. that you find in your dialogue. Actors put those in where it's natural to do so and they only make a script harder to read.

Delete the "pleasantries" and "chit-chat" from scenes. You're just wasting time, boring the reader and keeping them from YOUR story.

Try this: See just how terse you can make the dialogue. Terseness helps to create impact and makes characters seem more forceful and decisive in a drama and funnier in a comedy. When it gets to the point where you're feeling a little uncomfortable with the directness, it's probably about right.

Say the lines out loud as you write them. It's amazing how much this helps.

Have I said this before?

Most dialogue is
awful.

Cut it!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

How to Find Weaknesses in Your Script

- The new screenwriter tends to have a love affair with his/her "baby." He's married to every word and nuance he's carefully scripted onto each page. Often, it reads more like a novel than a screenplay and usually it needs a serious rewrite. It's time to get a divorce.

You must not be afraid to hack, chisel or cut-out **ANYTHING** that does not serve to push the story forward.

In screenwriting, you only have **TWO TOOLS** to work with in a screenplay:

DIALOGUE: that characters say

ACTION: a visual description of what is seen on the movie screen

This does NOT include:

- Anything anyone "knows" (i.e. "Ed heard about Jennifer's problem at school.")
- Anything that cannot be photographed (i.e. "Mary loves chocolate ice cream.")
- Anything the audience "knows" (i.e. "This is the same woman we saw earlier at the bar.")
- Any background information (i.e. "John is Tom's best friend.")
- Any action description that uses '-ing' words. (i.e. "Sue is reading the newspaper." should be "Sue reads the newspaper.")

Script Format Rules

PAGE NO. 7.25" TO 7.5"		0.5"
SLUGLINE 1.5" TO 7.5"	EXT. FAMOUS MOVIE STUDIO - DAY	RIGHT MARGIN (MAX)
ACTION DESCRIPTION 1.5" TO 7.5"	Hustle and bustle everywhere. EXTRAS in costume coming and going. CARS line up at the studio gate, awaiting entrance. JASON SPENCER, 22 year old star-struck Hoosier bounds up to the SECURITY GUARD, 50s, stuffy and humorless.	
CHARACTER NAME 3.5"	JASON I made it! Can you believe it?	
DIALOGUE 2.5" TO 5.5"	SECURITY GUARD I don't believe anything. I'm a professional skeptic.	
PARENTHETICAL 3.0" to 5.5"	JASON (nonplussed) Gosh, I guess they need everything in Hollywood, don't they?	
TRANSITION 6.0"	DISSOLVE TO:	

What do I need to do for the whole coursework?

- As well as the 1800 word screenplay, you should also write:
- A 500 word **Aims and Rationale**
- A 500 word **Evaluation**

Aims and Rationale

A very brief piece of work, but this is important

- You get marks for explaining the aims of your screenplay – i.e. to work within a particular genre; to write something typically British, for filming with a big budget, etc; for outlining the effects you wish to achieve

Aims and Rationale

- You also get marks for knowing your target audience and explaining how your screenplay is designed to appeal.
- You should explain how you have used appropriate generic styles and/or film form necessary to reach your target audience.

- E.g. if you are doing a Disney style cartoon, what does it have in common with other popular cartoons in terms of film form, narrative structure, characterisation, etc?
- It is fine to explain your influences, though you should not be copying them. You can create a moment of Hitchcock-style suspense, but if it involves multiple shots of a woman being stabbed in a shower to the sound of screeching violins, then something's gone wrong.