

Writing for short film

A short film script can be a great calling card for a writer - but in order for it to become a great calling card, you need to make your short script as perfect as you possibly can.

Short films are not a lesser form of cinematic storytelling – although you are unlikely to make money from them. Although TV broadcast opportunities may be limited, short films are shown in cinemas, win awards, and work as an introduction to talent. Many of the best writers and directors started out with shorts.

A short film can be anything from thirty seconds to thirty minutes in length – and this means they can do and be a great many different things. However, if you want to get your short into a festival, then keep it to no more than ten minutes. Remember: you can tell a great story in as little as 30 seconds. And chances are, the longer the short, the more expensive it will be to produce.

The great thing about shorts is that they can be anything – the only limit beyond the cost of production is that of your own imagination. So don't be hemmed in - let your imagination fly. Play with your ideas. Play with the form. Every short can and should be a unique vision.

Film is about telling stories in pictures, which is the most economical way of telling a story – and in the making of shorts, economy is everything. Remember the golden rule of filmmaking: show, don't tell. The idea and story can be focused enough in scope to exist entirely in the viewer's head, and so logic and time can play a much smaller role in the journey from beginning to end than in other formats.

The best short films are often a moment that is played out, but one that has a story at its heart - a conflict that has to be resolved, where there's a deadline to the action, where there's a choice that a character has to make. You should always try to tell a story. Short films aren't an excuse to break all the rules – but they are an opportunity to push the boundaries of what cinematic storytelling can do.

It's worth thinking about

- The simplicity, clarity and economy of the storytelling
- The vision of the piece, and its visual images
- Making every element pertinent
- Making your story coherent.

It's worth being careful of

- Conflicting and incoherent worlds
- Ideas that are too concept-driven

- A lack of narrative engine and story
- A lack of engaging characters
- A lack of focus and concision
- Action and repetition without meaning
- Descriptive dialogue
- Extended jokes with (usually unsatisfying) punch-lines.

Think about how your film will play to its audience. Does your story have a potentially universal appeal? What will the audience know and when will they know it? What will they be guessing? What questions will they have which need answering? And what can you show without having to explain things away?

The impact of page one is crucial. Are we emotionally engaged? What is the vision and world of the film? Is it original? Do we inhabit the characters? Do the world and story of the film have integrity and authenticity? The last moment is also crucial – it's easy to come away feeling very little about a short, so work towards a meaningful, satisfying ending.

Be careful of cliché, because there are so many of them in short films (hit-men for hire, post office heists, people seeing themselves die, children representing innocence, dysfunctional abusive relationships, films about writing or making films, in-jokes and navel-gazing). Write what you know and feel passionately about rather than something second-hand and culled from watching other films. Use the form to be fresh and original and unexpected - you don't get that opportunity very often in your writing career.

Think about the practicalities of writing your script so that it can be shot with a low or limited budget – there's never enough money around to spend on making shorts. Remember that digital technology is freeing up what filmmakers can do, and what they can afford to do. But remember also that a low budget short doesn't need to look cheap - unless, of course, you want it to.

One potential pitfall for writers can be directing their own scripts. Many of the most talented filmmakers write their own stories. But be careful of directing your own work because you want 'control' over the project. Creative collaboration can be a hugely rewarding experience - and if you're not a natural filmmaker, there's a chance you will spoil your writing with inexperienced filmmaking. Go to film festivals, meet filmmakers – find people with whom you can collaborate.

Spare a thought to the presentation of your script. It isn't hard to make it easy to read, and it's always worth the effort of rewriting and editing in order to make your story shine. There are no excuses for your script to not be as perfect as it can be.

Watch as many short films as you possibly can. There is no replacement for knowing what work is already out there, and knowing what you as an audience (as well as a writer) think and feel about it.