

## **Pens To Lens Curriculum Guide**

This curriculum guide should help you explain the basics of screenwriting to your students. Online resources are listed at the bottom of this section.

### **Learning Objectives**

- Students will understand the difference between writing a screenplay and writing a story
- Students will understand that film is a visual medium, and screenplays should reflect that
- Students will understand that there is an industry-standard screenwriting format and attempt to create a script that follows as closely as possible.
- Students will understand the difference between a short film and feature-length film

### **What is a screenplay?**

A screenplay is the written template that describes how to make films or television shows. Screenplays describe only what is seen in a finished movie. This includes primarily what the characters say (**dialogue**), as well as short descriptions of who the characters are, what the characters are doing (**action**), and where the characters are (**setting**).

### **How is a screenplay different from a book or short story?**

Books and short stories have narration that tells the reader what is happening, or what a character is thinking, often told through poetic description. In movies, the poetry is in the visuals and dialogue. The viewer is rarely TOLD that a character is taking an action; rather the action is performed on-screen. Similarly, characters do not announce their feelings; rather, an actor interprets the dialogue written by the screenwriter to convey the emotion.

Screenplays focus on the dialogue and matter-of-fact description. As action happens, it is written in present tense. See “How do you format a screenplay?”

### **How is a screenplay different from a play?**

Screenplay structure is comparable to stage play structure and can be taught similarly. The main difference is that films can use real locations and cameras see things differently than a stage play’s audience. Cameras can see expansive landscapes and subtle facial expressions, and screenwriters must constantly aware of where the camera can go to bring the strongest impact to the viewer.

### **How is a short film screenplay different from a feature length film screenplay?**

Short films are recognized for their ability to quickly and powerfully convey a single idea. While feature films create complex worlds through the use of sub-plots and large casts of characters, short films focus on a single narrative and only a small cast of characters. Sometimes a short film will only have one character struggling with the world around them.

Because a short film (at around ten minutes) has less material than a feature (at around 2 hours), it’s generally more focused. Short film audiences expect every part of the short film screenplay to serve the point of the film. Dialogue in a short film is extremely refined so that

unnecessary words don't confuse the main point. In fact, frequently there is little to no dialogue at all. Some of the best short films convey all of their story visually and with sound effects.

There is a rhythm to the storytelling in a short film that you can recognize after watching a few. See *online resource 1* and *online resource 2* to find some examples.

### **How do you approach writing a screenplay?**

The first step in writing a screenplay, like writing any story, is to think about what your screenplay will be about. All of the same principles of storywriting apply; plan out protagonists/antagonists, conflict, description, time and location, etc. Think about who your characters are, what the plot might be (what is the conflict and what is causing it), what actions your characters will make, and how your characters speak. There are four major building blocks to a script: Character, Location, Action, and Dialogue. (See **Worksheet A**.)

Many screenwriters like to start with an outline of the story, or use notecards to organize their thoughts on the story. Some even write out "treatments," which are like prose versions of the story they want to tell. Like any story, it is important to map out the plot and characters ahead of time.

To assemble these story elements into an actual story, screenwriters build a three-act structure. In the first act, the story introduces characters and setting. The second act, usually the longest, establishes and grows the conflict, and the third act has the climax and the conflict resolution. After arranging all the pieces, screenwriters can flesh out the screenplay in proper form.

*Online resource 3* is a useful guide to teaching the approach to writing plays, which is very similar to the approach to writing screenplays.

### **How do you format a screenplay?**

**Worksheet B** has formatting rules. For Pens To Lens, we have simplified the Hollywood-standard format to include the basics. Notably, we have omitted information on how to write transitions, shot directions, titles, and sound effects. Some of these omissions are described in *online resource 4*. Disney/Pixar's "Toy Story" screenplay is a fantastic example of good form, and can be found at *online resource 5*. A small excerpt from "Toy Story" is also provided in the contest documentation as a "sample script".

In standard formatting, each page of a screenplay translates to about 1 minute of screen time. This is why the submission length for Pens To Lens is 1-5 pages. Allowing for some embellishment by the filmmakers, student screenplays should translate into films that are less than 10 minutes.

Looking at a sample script is perhaps the easiest way of understanding how scripts are set up. Generally, action, location, and character description statements are on the left, and dialogue is in the middle of the script. Dialogue is always preceded by the speaking character's name on the line above, in all caps.

All screenplays have cover pages as well. Although they typically include few details, like the title, author's name, and contact information, for this competition, we ask that you consult the Submission Guidelines for what we expect on the cover page.

*Online resource 6* is a piece of software students may use and teachers may choose to use as a teaching aid. Celtx is free, it automatically formats scripts, and it provides free download of sample scripts. Because it formats scripts automatically, the screenwriter is free to focus on creative writing instead of technical details. Pens to Lens is happy to accept Celtx-formatted submissions.

#### **Extra advice in writing screenplays:**

- Write a cover page. The title belongs there, not on the first page of the script.
- Proofread your script. Making your hand into a “fish” will look very different from a “fist” on screen.
- Get someone else to proofread your script. We always miss our own mistakes.

#### **What practical limitations should students consider if they hope to get their screenplay produced by local filmmakers?**

The Champaign Movie Makers (CMM) community is large and has a lot of different talents and tools. CMM members have created, to name a few things, a 9-foot-tall robot puppet, a stop-motion spider, a full-scale unicorn body, a time-traveling portal, an 8-car wreck, a volcano, and a 100-person musical number.

However, in order to create many student screenplays, CMM can't throw all of these resources into every screenplay. Thanks to modern technology, there is very little that we cannot do. The limitations are on how much we can do, and how well. Common limitations include:

- Crowd scenes. It is difficult to gather upwards of 15 people at a time, especially if the crowd is supposed to look like something precise.
- Animation/computer effects. CMM has several animators, but animations can take a lot of time to make well, especially for a whole creature or character.
- Children and animals. Young kids and animals are hard to keep focused, especially during a potentially long day of filming. There are also sometimes legal concerns with filming children.
- Exotic locations. While it is possible to make a film set in the rolling hills of Scotland or on the runway of an airport with green screens and digital backgrounds, this is time-consuming and limiting to what the camera can look at. It is always easier to film in a real location.

Students should always consider what the filmmakers will need to do to make a scene a reality.

Don't consider these limitations to be absolute - part of the fun of filmmaking is problem-solving, making the impossible real. But a screenplay with only a couple of limitations is more likely to get chosen than one with all of them.

### **Suggested activities for Grades 6-12:**

**(Note: You may suggest your students use extra paper to answer the questions on the provided worksheets.)**

- Watch a short film and analyze it. See **Worksheet C**.
- Write a page of script in the right format. See **Worksheet D**.
- Adapt a screenplay from a short story or something the student has written. See **Worksheet E**.

### **Suggested activities for Grades K-5:**

- Watch a short film and analyze it. See **Exercise 1**.
- Storyboard an existing short film. See **Exercise 2**.
- Storyboard the student's own story. See **Exercise 3**.

### **Online Resources:**

Disclaimer: These external sites are not guaranteed to have kid-friendly advertisements. However, we do consider the website content valuable.

- 1 - <http://www.shortoftheweek.com/>  
Online collection of short films. Be sure to pre-screen any short film for appropriateness for your students.
- 2 - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pixar\\_Short\\_Films\\_Collection\\_Volume\\_1](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pixar_Short_Films_Collection_Volume_1)  
Pixar short films DVD, available at many online retailers.
- 3 - [http://www.ehow.com/how\\_4442787\\_teach-children-write-script.html](http://www.ehow.com/how_4442787_teach-children-write-script.html)  
A teaching guide to approaching play writing.
- 4 - <http://www.screenwriting.info>  
Instructions on screenwriting format.
- 5 - <http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Toy-Story.html>  
Full-length "Toy Story" screenplay.
- 6 - <https://www.celtx.com/index.html>  
Celtx is a free piece of software that automatically formats scripts, provides free download of sample scripts, provides a community of amateur screenwriters, allows online collaboration on scripts, and their website includes many resources and how-to videos on screenwriting.
- 7 - <http://ywp.scriptfrenzy.org/educators>  
Script Frenzy is another screenwriting competition for students of different ages. Their teaching materials are much more thorough than ours. If you would like to teach an in-depth unit, consider using their materials.