

# Media Lab

## SCREENWRITING



**LEARNING RESOURCE**



AUSTRALIAN FILM TELEVISION & RADIO SCHOOL  
MEDIALAB.AFTRS.EDU.AU



# Media Lab

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### ABOUT AFTRS' MEDIA LAB

AFTRS MEDIA LAB provides accessible media arts resources to Australian primary and secondary teachers and students. MEDIA LAB will help build core creativity and storytelling capabilities that will be required for the jobs of the future. The Australian Film TV Radio School (AFTRS) is the nation's leading screen and broadcast school that delivers future-focused, industry-relevant education, research and training.

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## SECTION 1

### WHAT IS SHORT FILM? WHAT MAKES A GOOD ONE?



#### WHAT IS A SHORT FILM?

The term **short film** is somewhat self-explanatory; it's a film that is short. In this screenwriting unit, we focus on short dramas, but other kinds of short films include documentary, comedy and action.

Generally, short films are between 5 to 40 minutes long; they can be shorter, but not longer. Experts often suggest that the shorter the film, the better. Unlike feature length films (90 minutes or more), short films allow the viewer to connect with a story or situation over a limited timeframe. Although many short films successfully convey detailed stories, the time constraints often prompt a writer to focus on a snapshot of life; a moment, a situation.

The challenge is not to create a large scale production with multiple climaxes in the plot, however short film writers must still deliver a story with characters that are believable and a plot that is engaging in a shorter space of time. Many see this as exciting and fun, and a wonderful way to begin writing for screen.

**“I THINK THE SHORT (FILM FORMAT) GIVES A FREEDOM TO FILMMAKERS. WHAT'S APPEALING IS THAT YOU DON'T HAVE AS MUCH RESPONSIBILITY FOR STORYTELLING AND PLOT. THEY CAN BE MORE LIKE A PORTRAIT...” – JANE CAMPION (AUSTRALIAN ACADEMY AWARD WINNING FILM DIRECTOR).**

#### How does the scriptwriting phase fit in the overall production process?

The job of a screenwriter is to write scripts. (Scripts can also be called screenplays.) Sometimes they may be commissioned by a production company to write a particular story or something that fits a specific brief. Alternatively they may develop an idea into script form and then aim to sell it or find filmmakers to turn it into a finished film.

Sometimes writers work with a partner or in a team of writers but many work alone. Although screenwriters can also work as producers or directors, professional screenwriters often do not fulfil other roles during production. Once the scriptwriting phases is complete, the writer hands over their script to the producer and/or director who will then take it to use as the production phase starts.

**Extension:** As well as the script itself, a screenwriter may also write a logline, a synopsis or treatment to tell others more about the central ideas of their script. You can research these terms online.

## ACTIVITY: FAVOURITE STORY

DIVIDE THE CLASS INTO GROUPS OF 3 OR 4

First, take 2-3 minutes to answer the questions beneath by yourselves, then take another 5 minutes to share your answers with each other.

- 1 What is your favourite story? (This could be from a book, a film, a TV show – any platform at all)
- 2 Why is it your favourite? What makes it special?
- 3 In just one sentence, summarise what happens to the main character of the story?

Now write down everyone's answers to question 2. Be brief and summarise the answers. You may find you have lots of different responses or perhaps just a few.

Finally, one person from each small group shares your answers to question 2 with the whole class.

## WRITING A SCRIPT FOR A GREAT SHORT FILM

Before we begin writing our scripts, we need to be aware of several practical considerations that help to make an entertaining short film.

- 1 **Being aware of your resources.** If you don't have a lot of money, actors, props or a lot of access to an editing suite, don't write a short film that requires all of those resources. Be prepared to write what your budget and resources will allow for.
- 2 **Having a strong opener.** This is called your 'hook'. The opening scene to your short film needs to instantly engage the viewer.
- 3 **Minimal characters.** Too many characters will crowd and distract from the objective of the film. Introducing multiple characters to your story can use up valuable time, losing the interest of your viewers. Background characters are okay, but one or two protagonists is best. These key characters (or one character) still need to be interesting and relatable protagonists, so design a protagonist that is multi-faceted.
- 4 **Location. Location. Location.** Remember, this is short film. Multiple locations can take up time in the establishment of your story and result in your viewer losing interest. Minimal location changes are best. Think: can your story occur in one or two locations?
- 5 **Write what you know.** Writing what you know is generally more authentic and allows the viewer to connect better. This is not always localised to what you have personally experienced – although that can help. Instead, this means doing your research and making sure that your writing is convincing.
- 6 **Show, not tell.** Allow your viewer to connect visually with the story, instead of relying on narration. There is an age-old saying, "Actions speak louder than words"; this is true for the screen too.
- 7 **Production Design: A bookcase. A bottle of wine.** They enhance the story by allowing the viewer to instantly connect with an image that is connected with your story. Think: what resources or props will enhance your story visually?
- 8 **Watch short films!** Watch as many short films as you can before writing. This allows you to research if your idea has been done before. It also allows for you to discover any interesting visual or audio tools being used in existing short stories.

## WORKSHEET: FILM ANALYSIS

Watch one of the following short films or one that your teacher suggests. Referring back to the key elements of writing for short film, analyse each short film and fill in the boxes:



**MARRY ME, BY MICHELLE LEHMAN 6:53**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XFdbZHMBxfg>



**SOMETHING FISHY, BY KIRSTY BEST 6:29 (FOR STAGE 4 AND OLDER)**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=shNEL1FtS\\_0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=shNEL1FtS_0)



**CAT BURGLAR, BY DARWIN SCHULZE 7:07**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kx8DqShyduQ>



**BE MY BROTHER BY GENEVIEVE CLAY-SMITH 8:50**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3k2sXoVmPIA>

1 What can we tell about the resources available to the makers of this short film?

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2 How was the opening shot engaging? What feeling did it evoke in you as the viewer?

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3 How many characters are in this short film?

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4 Location, location, location. Where is this short film shot? Was there multiple rooms or buildings?

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**5** How connected to this story did you feel; have you ever been in a similar situation?

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**6** Was there dialogue? How (else?) did the filmmakers convey the story to you?

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**7** Were there any specific audio/visual editing processes that enriched this short film?

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## **THE ETHICS OF STORYTELLING**

When making a film there are several things a filmmaker must consider in terms of the ethics of storytelling. Ethics is “doing the right thing” and means that you must take into consideration other people’s perspectives, the representation of the subjects and the impact the story may have on them and the audience.

### **Activity 1**

The questions below give you an idea of the sort of ethical issues you need to be aware of when making a film. Take the time to answer these questions, and share your thoughts with another filmmaker in the class, to gain their perspective on the story you wish to tell:

- What is your connection to the story and the characters? Do you have a relationship with similar characters in real life, do you belong to the community the story is rooted in? If not, are you the right person to tell this story?
- How do I know if I am the right person?

Ask the following questions: What is your intention when telling this story? What do you hope to achieve from making this film? Do you want people to have more empathy for the subjects, are you hoping to expose something, to achieve a change? What are the positive and negative outcomes of sharing this story?

Remember, filmmaking is a learning process, and while you can write exactly the narrative you want, when making the film you will encounter a number of challenges that question the authenticity of the story, hence it is important to be open to these changes, while maintaining your artistic vision.

## **Authenticity and Inclusivity**

These are two important concepts to keep in mind when writing a script and story

### **Authenticity**

When writing about a place, a community or a character, it's important to have a depth of understanding of the subject so you authentically represent them. For example, if you are writing a story about an ethnic community, firstly you must ask, do you belong to this community and if not how does that impact the story. Ask, do you have all the insights, have you done enough research, have you consulted with members of that community?

### **Inclusivity**

Inclusivity is about having an openness to incorporating diversity in your work. If you have written a script with only characters that belong to one identity, whether it's male, Anglo/Celtic, heterosexual, then you must ask yourself are these characteristics important to the story. If not, then can the character be female, non-white, transgender etc. Maybe they have a disability. Creating characters that represent the broad spectrum of identities in Australia is a good way to support those communities. Remember you should not write about a subject you don't know about just because you want to be inclusive. Make sure you do lots of research or at least check with friends who identify with these characters to ensure you have an authentic representation.

## **Activity 2**

A filmmaker wants to write a short film set in your school, with your class as the main characters. The filmmaker is not from your neighbourhood, and he is in his fifties, married with no children.

In groups of four discuss how you would ensure the story of your classroom could be told authentically and inclusively? How would you advise the filmmaker on making this story?

## **INDIGENOUS CHARACTERS AND THEMES**

Australian storytellers who want to make a film with Indigenous characters, direct a documentary focusing on the Indigenous community, or write a script with Indigenous material needs to be familiar with specific filmmaking protocols and practices. AFTRS has collaborated with some of Australia's most experienced filmmakers to offer some insights and advice on best practices in this video.

<http://www.aftrs.edu.au/indigenous/consultation>

## SECTION 2

### ELEMENTS OF SCREEN STORY



#### CREATIVE CHALLENGE: PART A

Your teacher or one of the students needs to set up an alarm, to sound after 3 minutes. Before this, get a few blank pieces of paper and pens ready.

When the alarm sounds, you'll need to come up with as many different story ideas as you can. Remember the last group activity where you described a whole story in just a few words? Now it's time to do it but using your own story ideas.

You don't need to write whole sentences. You could draw sketches of what happens in your story idea, or just write a few words. Don't worry if the ideas make sense, just write down as much as you can.

Examples might be:

- Alex loves dancing / enters a dance competition / feels very nervous / best friend helps her face her fears / she wins the comp.

#### CREATIVE CHALLENGE: PART B

Share with the group how the exercise felt to you. Was it fun or hard?

Now work alone to re-read all your ideas. Put a star by your favourite ones. Later on we'll come back to your ideas and develop them further as you move closer to writing a script.

## THE HERO'S JOURNEY

Short films tell a story. These stories need to be compelling otherwise your viewer will lose interest. There are literally millions of stories that can be told; comical, romantic, action or thriller stories to name a few. Short film is seen as a wonderful medium to explore various ways of storytelling, often pushing creative boundaries or expressing ideas in a new way.

One of the most popular plot ideas is called **The Hero's Journey**. In 1949 Joseph Campbell wrote this book with this title based upon years of research into various mythical, religious and legendary tales. The journey of a hero (female or male, human or animal or make believe) in a story generally contains most or all of the following elements:

1

### Meeting the hero

Introducing the main character, the hero and setting of the scene (maybe birth, or a glimpse of their daily life).

2

### Refusal or reluctance

The hero's refusal or reluctance to embark on a journey (often due to self-doubt or fear) followed by a decision to begin the adventure.

3

### Meeting the mentor

Help from a wise, brave, kind character or associate (a character that possesses a trait the hero himself/herself does not have – yet!).

4

### The challenge

This could be dealing with an enemy, an adversary or a difficult situation – the hero decides to take action and face the challenge.

5

### The climax

What happens when the hero faces the enemy or tries to fix a difficult situation. Often with the threat of something terrible occurring to them or someone they care about.

6

### The reward

The hero deals with the impact of their action in the climax. Maybe they 'won' or maybe they 'lost' but things have changed and they have learnt from the experience.

7

### Resolution

This is where the story resolves itself, the ending may be happy or sad.

## WORKSHEET: HERO'S JOURNEY

Think of one of your favourite films or another film you know really well: can you identify which parts of the story link to the different parts of *The Hero's Journey*? The hero's journey can also apply to an anti-hero protagonist (a character who may not seem like a traditional hero), for example in *Shrek*. Despite him being almost the complete opposite of a hero, he completes the same journey as one. Can you plot the hero's journey for the film *Shrek* or another film?

You may find that not all the stages appear in the film you investigate or that some stages are repeated.

<b>SCREENWRITER:</b>		<b>FILM TITLE:</b>	
<b>STAGE OF THE HERO'S JOURNEY</b>		<b>SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE MATCHING PART FROM THE FILM</b>	
<b>Meeting the hero</b>			
<b>Refusal or reluctance</b>			
<b>Meeting the mentor</b>			
<b>The challenge</b>			
<b>The climax</b>			
<b>The reward</b>			
<b>Resolution</b>			

## SECTION 3

# STRUCTURE OF A SHORT FILM



While there is no one recipe for writing a short film, there are some acknowledged writing tools that are helpful for the overall process of screenwriting. By implementing the tried and tested methods experienced writers provide, we enable ourselves to approach the writing process with confidence. One of the biggest necessary components to writing for short film is to adhere to the structure of screenwriting for this format.

Once a storyline has been decided upon, it's important to remember the goals of all short films:

- 1 Engage your viewer immediately
- 2 Maintain your viewer's attention until the very end.

This may seem quite simple; however, there is most certainly an art to connecting with the audience in the first few moments that your film begins. Engaging your audience immediately is known as creating a 'hook'. Maintaining the attention of your viewer throughout the short film will be much easier also if you divide your script into three simple acts.

### HOOKS

A hook will arrest the attention of your viewer, fascinating them and immersing them in the story as quickly as possible. This may be done by the use of an interesting shot, or a fight or conflict between characters, even the use of a combination of a setting and brief dialogue.

For example, let's imagine that the opening scene of the short film is a long shot of a quiet suburb. Next we see a street, then a house, then a room where a young woman is sleeping soundly. Next, quite abruptly, we hear the cacophony of a garbage truck and see it entering the street (the audio and visual of the truck is a complete contradiction to the peaceful, quiet scene of the young woman sleeping). The camera then returns to the young woman who sits up straight in bed, hair all messy, eyes wide open, who jumps to her feet wearing only undies and yells, "No!". The audience has been hooked into a story about forgetting to put your bins out with a series of shots, sound effects and one word of dialogue.

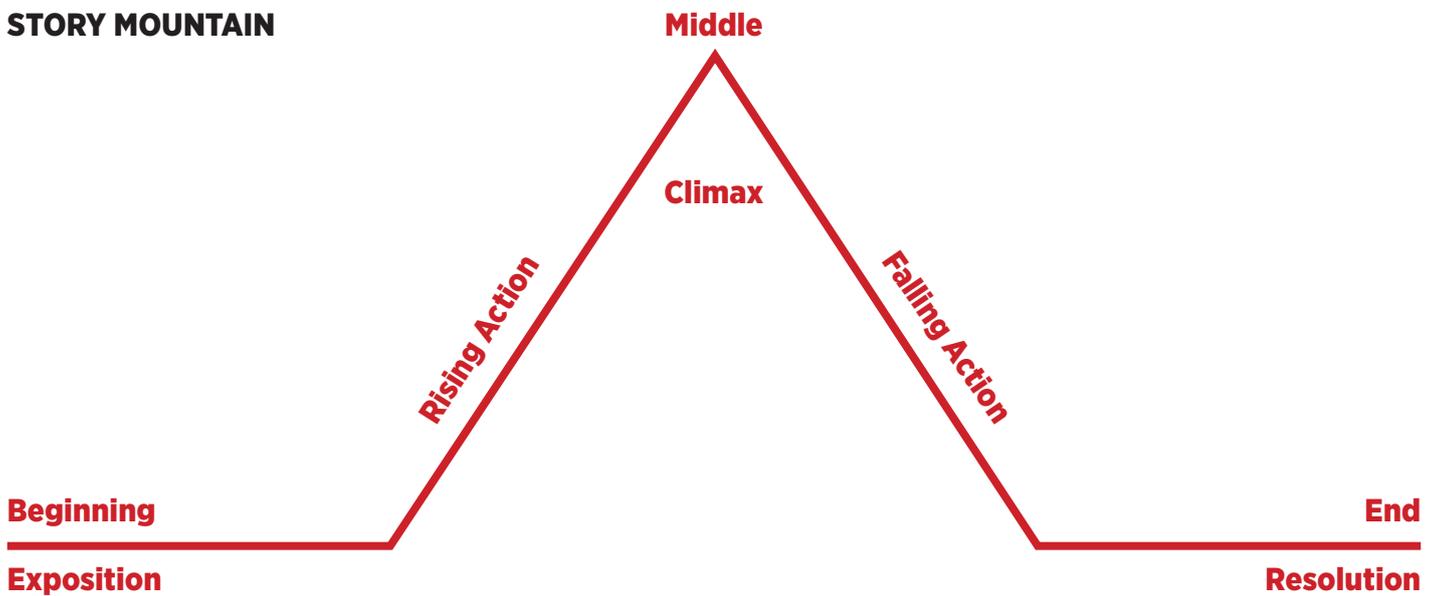
**DISCUSS: CAN YOU THINK OF ANY MOVIES OR SHORT FILMS YOU HAVE SEEN IN WHICH YOU REMEMBER THE HOOK THAT WAS USED TO ENGAGE YOU? HOW IS THE VIEWER 'HOOKED' AT THE START OF ON THE SAME PAGE?**

## THREE ACT STRUCTURE

Dividing your short film into three acts is one of the best ways to write and produce a successful and succinct short film. The three acts are as follows: The Set Up, The Point of No Return and The Resolution.

<b>Act 1 The Set up</b>	This is the establishment of the who, what and where. Who are the characters, what are they doing, and where are they doing it? It's the foundation for the short film; the setting and scene.
<b>Act 2 The Point of No Return</b>	This is the part of the short film where the protagonist begins to make decisions that will ultimately alter the course of their future. It is where they make choices that will dig them deeper into the drama of the storyline. Regardless of genre, the protagonist at this point engages in behaviour that leads them to a place of no return to their original starting point.
<b>Act 3 The Resolution</b>	As the title clearly articulates, this is the act where the short film resolves and ends. This is an area where you can bend the rules and engage in risks, particularly in comical or satirical short films. Remember, however, this act needs to allow the viewer to feel that the goal of the protagonist has been addressed, ironed-out or settled.

## STORY MOUNTAIN



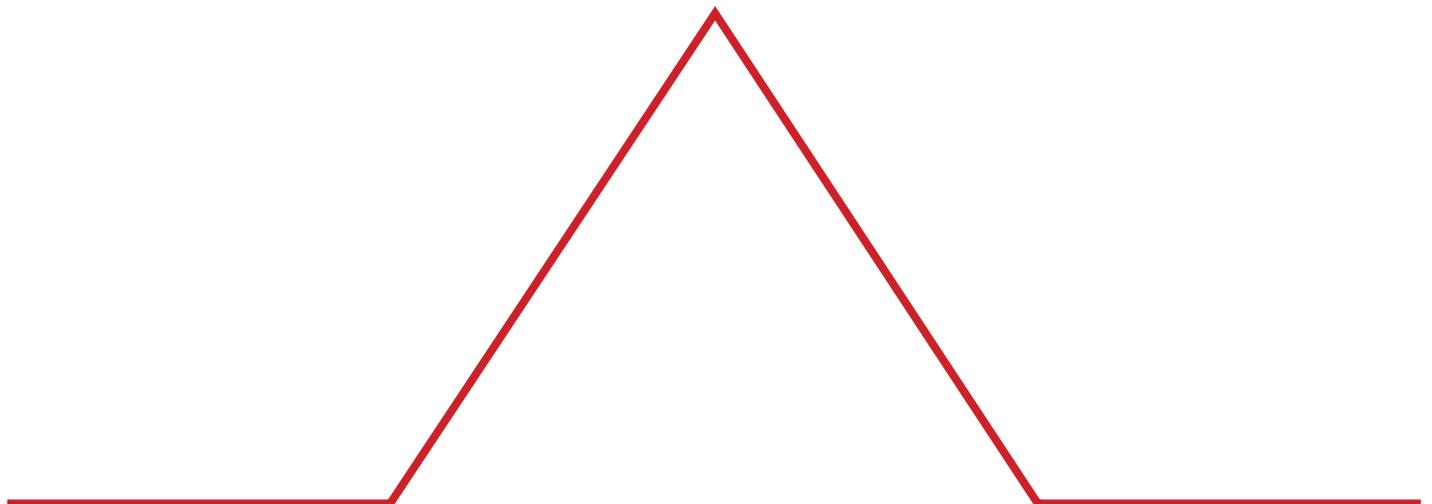
### ACTIVITY: STORY MOUNTAIN

Watching the short film listed below, or one that your teacher suggests, create your own story mountain for the film filling in the elements of both story, and of the Hero's Journey.



#### **ON THE SAME PAGE**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F\\_nb5wBsTaQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_nb5wBsTaQ)



**Watch one of the short films on page 6, or one suggested by your teacher.**

In groups brainstorm and identify the 'hook' and the three individual acts.  
Discuss the exact places where you think each act ends and the next one begins.

Hook:

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Description of the 3-act structure:

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## SECTION 4

# CREATING CHARACTERS



The success of a short film can largely fall on how engaging your characters are. In fact, it's important to thoroughly develop characters before writing the plot. Relatable and believable characters help the audience to connect with the plot, keeping their attention until the end. Dull or predictable characters will result in your viewers losing interest. A well-developed character will also enable the writing process to work much smoother; if you have comprehensively explored and identified your protagonist, understanding how they respond to various challenges and/or a rival will design your plot. Many people feel that designing characters can be one of the most exciting parts of the writing process.

It's a time when you get to really explore the range of multifaceted elements that make people unique, interesting and engaging.

Developed characters, with individual personality traits, flaws, skills, dreams, and fears make your short film more believable. It's important not to make your protagonist cliché or perfect; a protagonist who exhibits these qualities will almost certainly be viewed as annoying and totally un-relatable. Nobody is perfect, and someone who believes they are is seen as arrogant – you don't want this for your short film. Luckily, there are a number of steps to follow to enable you to design versatile, convincing and inviting characters.

### 1 Start with personality

Designing your protagonist's personality is one of the best places to start. Imagining what their strengths, weaknesses, quirks, passions etc. are can often help with the next step – the backstory.

### 2 Character backstory

What is the story behind your character? What is their home-life? Work life? What challenges have they faced in the past that have shaped how they respond to certain obstacles now? Think about what has shaped them social, psychologically and emotionally.

### 3 Stay away from stereotypes

Predictable characters are not engaging. Not many people want to sit through a film (even a short one) if it is filled with characters who are boring and generalised. Not all blonde girls are ditzy. Not all trolls are grumpy. Every boy doesn't grow up loving cars and playing football. When we break free of the stereotypes our characters become interesting, which leads into our next point – contradictory characters.

### 4 Contradictory character elements

This is where designing your character can get really unique and interesting. The best protagonists have elements of their personality that stand contradictory to the rest of their basic character. An example of this is Lenny from Sharktale; he's a shark from an exclusively predatory family – who is a vegetarian. Perhaps your protagonist is a pilot who is terrified of flying. Or you have a character that is extroverted and vivacious when at work, but suffers incredible social anxiety. The parts of ourselves that make us interesting are often the parts that stand as confusing or opposing.

### 5 Complete a character checklist

Character checklists are detailed and thorough exercises that help to make sure we have explored all areas of our developed characters.

The Neiman Foundation at Harvard University provides a detailed character checklist for protagonist development. Below is a simplified version of their checklist. Individually, begin to design your protagonist for your short story. Be sure to include as many thorough and detailed answers to the prompts as possible. Once you have completed the task, gather in small groups and share your characters with each other. Be aware of any questions your peers ask about your character and be prepared to elaborate and expand on who your protagonist is. Let's get creative!

Character's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Distinguishing traits (voice, hair, tattoos etc.): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Friends: \_\_\_\_\_

Family: \_\_\_\_\_

Difficult people in the characters life (Include why): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Present problem: \_\_\_\_\_

Greatest fear: \_\_\_\_\_

How will problem get worse? \_\_\_\_\_

Strongest character traits: \_\_\_\_\_

Weakest character traits: \_\_\_\_\_

Sees self as: \_\_\_\_\_

Is seen by others as: \_\_\_\_\_

Sense of humour: \_\_\_\_\_

Basic nature: \_\_\_\_\_

Ambitions: \_\_\_\_\_

Philosophy of life (Include how it came to be): \_\_\_\_\_

Hobbies: \_\_\_\_\_

Preferred type of music, art, reading material: \_\_\_\_\_

Dialogue tag (Idioms used, speech traits, e.g. "you know"): \_\_\_\_\_

Dress: \_\_\_\_\_

Favourite colours: \_\_\_\_\_

Pastimes: \_\_\_\_\_

Description of home (Physical and the "feel"): \_\_\_\_\_

Most important thing to know about this character: \_\_\_\_\_

One-line characterization: \_\_\_\_\_

## SECTION 5

# WRITING DIALOGUE



Now that you have examined the structure of a short film and created some great characters, it is time to add some dialogue. Dialogue is simply conversation between characters in your film. Dialogue in your short film needs to easily and efficiently convey plot and character detail. It also needs to work in a way where your viewers connect and engage with your film. Too much dialogue takes up valuable time in your short film. Dialogue that is continual narration can often make your viewer lose interest. Having your characters ‘tell’ the story with their dialogue also makes your short film appear mundane and simple. Many short film creators opt for no dialogue at all and rely on body language, emotion and a musical score or audio editing to convey the story of their short film. These films can be just as powerful, creative or engaging as those with conversation – it’s all about intentional writing. Dialogue is also a great way to convey the genre of your short film (comedy, action, romance etc.) – at the end of the day just make sure that you are using dialogue in a way that is relatable for your viewer.

### CONVERSATIONS

A great way to prepare yourself for writing dialogue is to be aware of conversations that are happening around you. The cafeteria, the bus – even the bathroom – is a place where constant conversation occurs. Listen to what people are saying to each other; be aware of how people talk. The way that we talk is not always how we write. Listening to the way people engage with each other is a wonderful way to ready yourself for writing dialogue for your characters. Slang and colloquial language is generally a large part of the communication that you will hear around you; pay attention to these elements of conversation as they can assist you greatly in writing dialogue that is relatable and engaging.

### SHOWING, NOT TELLING

The actions and movements of your actors in your short film enable the viewer to understand the story; dialogue is there to back-up those actions and movements. It needs to enhance your story, assist your characters and engage your audience. This is often referred to as ‘showing, not telling’. When you are writing your dialogue for your characters, remember that their dialogue is actually for the benefit of your viewer. You want your conversation to intrigue your viewer whilst adding to the telling of your story. As you are writing the dialogue think “Is my character simply stating something obvious?” Often we can change the way a character says something, and replace it with gestures and reflective statements to make it less obvious. For example, look at the table below for dialogue concerning death:

## SCENARIO 1

### ARWIN

*(Directly; agitated)*

Far out Donita, you're always so defensive!

### DONITA

*(Defensive)*

It's not my fault, Arwin. Ever since my parents were killed in that car accident in the snow when we went to Canada I just feel like I don't belong.

*(Storms out of room)*

## SCENARIO 2

### ARWIN

*(Directly; agitated)*

Far out Donita, you're always so defensive!

### DONITA

*(Defensive)*

It's not my fault, Arwin! I just -  
*(Abruptly stops talking. Pauses. Looks to family photo on the kitchen wall)*

I guess...

it's just been so hard without mum and dad  
*(traces scar on her wrist from accident)*

Can you see the difference between the two script excerpts? How does scenario one differ from scenario two? Which one do you think would work best to keep your viewer engaged?

## ACTIVITY

### COMPARE THE CONVERSATIONS

## SCREENWRITER:

**Setting the scene:** two people are in a store – one is purchasing items, the other is working the register. They engage in conversation about what they have planned for the rest of the day.

For this activity you will initially need to form groups of four people. Once in a group you will choose a genre, either: action, romance or comedy.

Split your group into two pairs. Pair one will write a short scene that is obvious and detailed with dialogue. Pair two will write a short scene that allows for showing, not telling, and for reflective statements. Write enough dialogue to last 1 minute then perform for the class. Reflect on what worked well, and what you want to stay away from when writing the dialogue for your own short film.

## SECTION 6

# THE LANGUAGE OF SCREENWRITING: FORMATTING YOUR SCRIPT



So – you’ve explored a storyline, examined the importance of three acts, developed characters and looked at the use of dialogue. Now you’re ready to start writing the script for your screen play! When it comes to putting pen to paper (or, rather, typing it up) there are some stringent guidelines to follow. These formatting rules and guidelines allow for swift and easy reading by all members of your production team; remember it’s not just your actors reading them.

Following universal formatting steps in script writing allows for those involved in set, costume, editing, directing (and a great many other areas of production) to readily understand and assist during the preparation, filming and editing of your short film. The key to formatting? Be consistent the whole way through. You may choose to slightly change how you present your script, however, if you are consistent any reader will know what you mean.

Listed below are a number of points for you to remember when writing your script:

### HEADINGS AND SCENE DESCRIPTIONS

- Each scene needs to have a heading to explain what is happening in the scene
- Headings are always CAPITALISED and **BOLDED**
- Some of the words will be abbreviated (most commonly Interior to INT and exterior to ENT)
- Under the heading, start each scene with a description of who (which actor), what (the situation), when (the time of day), where (location) and why (purpose of this scene).
- When writing scene directions, any actors who have dialogue have capitalised names, other actors who do not have dialogue are not capitalised.

## WRITING THE DIALOGUE

- Dialogue is always centred on the page
- The name is always capitalised
- Direct instructions about the dialogue (emotion or body language) needs to accompany the typed dialogue.

### BIRTHDAY SURPRISE

#### 1. INT. LOUNGE-ROOM DAY

John comes into the lounge-room he is clearly in a hurry. He slams the door behind him. Mary hears the door slam and comes to the doorway, she is about to enter but she sees John is up to something. She watches John as he hides an envelope inside a book on the book-shelf. Mary enters. John quickly picks up a magazine as she enters and sits down.

JOHN  
Oh, hi.

MARY  
Hi. What you up to?

JOHN  
Nothing, just reading.

MARY  
(referring to the upside down magazine)  
Upside down?

JOHN  
(he puts down the magazine)  
Yeah, well just looking at the pictures. Anyway ... I better get ready... I'm meeting some friends for dinner.

John leaves the room. Mary waits until she hears the door slam. She pulls out the book and shakes it the envelope falls out on the carpet. John's pokes his head around the corner, watching her. Mary stares at the envelope. Finally she can't resist, she opens it, very carefully. As she turns the last flap, she discovers a small card with "caught you" written on it. John comes back in laughing.

John brings a package out from behind his back.

JOHN  
Happy birthday, I didn't forget.

Mary can't help but smile.

## ACTIVITY: SCRIPT FORMAT

Use the rest of this section to work on your script. Pay attention to the dialogue and formatting elements presented in this worksheet. There is another sample script at the end of this resource.

## SECTION 7

# EDITING AND RE-WRITING



As you know by now, writing a script for short film is a process with many detailed steps. After writing your first draft of your script, one of the most important steps needs to happen – editing. In a professional situation, editing is where the script is analysed for authenticity to the original story, checked to fit within the resources and budget of the short film, and prepared for delivery to directors and producers. It is also where the format is checked again and an editor will make sure that the dialogue and directions are not too lengthy or superfluous. A script for a short film should be between about 10 and 40 pages (a great rule of thumb is to say about one page of script to one minute on screen, though this will depend on the content and action). A great plan for a first-timer is a 6-10 page script.

Some people say “writing is re-writing” – this means that part of the writing process is looking at what you have down and seeing if there is a better way (or a more efficient way) to writing. Other people say that “writing is deleting” – this is also a very important part of editing also. You need to be prepared to look at parts of your work and delete them if they take away or do not effectively add to your final script. This is a very hard thing to do sometimes and is one of the reasons why having someone else edit your work is very important. Someone else can objectively look at your script and see what works and what could be changed because they have not been emotionally involved in designing the characters, the plot, or any other part of the script process. Their eyes are fresh eyes, and have the ability to help you get your script to its final draft ready for submission.

When you edit your drafts in this unit of work there are several key things that you will want to look out for. These editing points will enable you to get your script to a place where it is ready to story board (Section 8) and for a final presentation.

### EDITING SETTING AND ACTION DIRECTIONS

- Are the setting/scene directions concise and direct?
- Are the action directions congruent and do they flow? Can you see anything that is left out or needs to be included to ensure the team can understand clearly the vision for this scene?
- Are the characters consistent? Is the plot confusing at any point?
- Is the formatting consistent? (Think headings, capitalisation, bolded).

## EDITING DIALOGUE

You're writing a script for a short film – remember that your dialogue needs to be succinct

- Greetings – do your characters need to say their greeting? Can this be a visual thing? Remember that what your viewer sees is often more important than what they hear.
- Do your scenes start with a character asking a question? Can this scene start with the answer to this question instead?
- Are any of your characters' lines long and drawn-out? Can you shorten them?

## STILL NEED TO MAKE YOUR SCRIPT A BIT SHORTER AND TIGHTER?

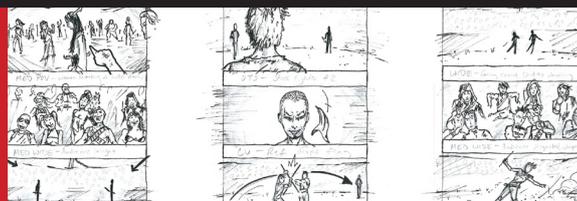
- Cut down any overly long action directions
- Are any parts of the script repetitive?
- Are any of your characters referred to by their name consistently in dialogue? This isn't how normal conversation occurs.
- Are your characters showing or telling in their role? This is where you can cut down on lots of space.

## ACTIVITY: SCRIPT FEEDBACK

Once you have finished a draft script swap with another person. Have them edit your script; they can either print the script out and make notes in coloured pen or they can make highlighted notes electronically. Once you have their editing draft back, look at the notes and suggested changes and adjust your script accordingly. If time allows, continue to repeat this process of having someone else edit your script until you arrive at your final draft and you're ready for storyboarding.

## SECTION 8

# STORYBOARDING



Now that you've finished drafting your written script, it is time to plan how your story will look when it is filmed. The storyboard is usually created by the director but this can also be a good development tool for you. Storyboarding consists of visuals and written directions that show how the entirety of your short film is to be set up and filmed. Storyboarding is essentially a detailed list for your entire production team regarding the plot and visuals of your short film.

You do not need to be an amazing artist to create your storyboard. You simply need to be able to draw a stick figure and write clear, succinct directions about what is happening in the scene. In a professional setting, the story board also includes resources that are needed for filming that scene, however, you will not need to do this here. It is easy to think that your storyboard is going to be pages and pages long as you outline every minute detail – but this isn't the case. Your storyboard is an abridged version of your story.

### ACTIVITY 1

### SCREENWRITER:

#### SHORT FILM AND ACCOMPANYING STORYBOARDS

Read the Birthday Surprise film script on page 22 and its storyboard and compare how they work together and represent each other.

BIRTHDAY SURPRISE - STORYBOARDS



1. WS - John comes in front door



2. MCU - Mary peeks around the corner



3. OTS MWS POV - John takes out a book



4. CU - John puts an envelope in the book



5. MS-MCU - Mary walks in the room "What are you up to ..."



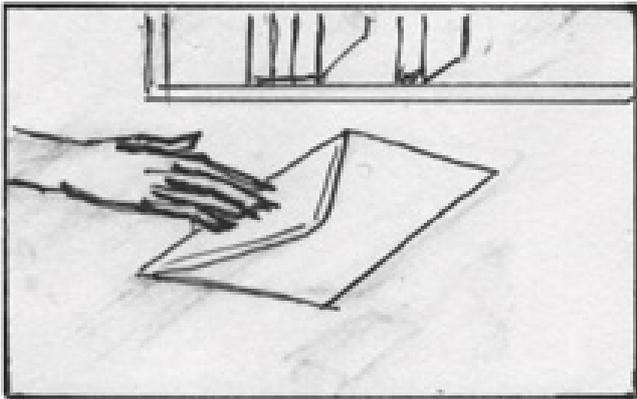
6. MS - John sits on couch reading magazine upside down.



7. MS OTS John leaves



8. MS Mary looks at the bookcase and takes the book.



9. CU - envelope falls on the floor



10. CU - Mary looks at the envelope.



11. CU - Mary opens the envelope.



12. MCU John pokes his head around the corner



13. MWS OTS John to Mary - "Very funny"



14. MS - John shows Mary the present. "Happy Birthday"



15. MCU Mary smiles.



16. MCU John smiles.

## BIRTHDAY SURPRISE - SHOTLIST

Shot	Size	Description
1	WS	John comes in the front door and slams it.
2	MCU	Mary peeks her head around the corner
3	OTS MWS POV	The back of Mary's head and the room as she watches John takes out a book
4	CU	John puts an envelope in the book
5	MS - MCU	Mary walks in the room
6	MS	John turns around notices Mary and pulls a magazine off the shelf and sits down on the armchair.
7	MS OTS	John exits
8	MS OTS	Mary looks at the books
9	CU	envelope falls on the floor
10	CU	Mary looks at the envelope
11	CU	Mary opens the envelope and discovers card with "Caught You"
12	MCU	John pokes his head around the corner
13	MWS OTS	John walks in, Mary says "Very funny"
14	MS	John brings present out from behind his back "Happy Birthday"
15	MCU	Mary smiles
16	MCU	John smiles

Your storyboard for your short film needs to be no more than twelve boards long. In fact; the shorter the better. Although this short film is animated, the storyboard still allowed for the entire production team to know the plot of the story and what the writer envisioned the film to look like.

## ACTIVITY 2 CREATING YOUR OWN STORYBOARD

Using the storyboard template below, begin your layout for your own script. Remember that you cannot use more than twelve boards (squares) when designing your storyboard. You also do not need to use all twelve if you do not need to.



Action/Notes

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Action/Notes

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Action/Notes

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Action/Notes

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## SECTION 9

# FINAL EVALUATION AND REFLECTION



Professional writers for short film spend a lot of time reflecting on their work and evaluating their efforts over the writing journey. This process allows a writer to make any final changes to their script, acknowledge their strengths and shed light on growth areas. This also allows a person to be more prepared for their next writing experience, which in turn will enable them to perfect their craft of writing for short film.

Often writers will share their evaluation and reflective thoughts with another professional that they trust or a close friend. Much like the drafting process, this allows for fresh eyes to objectively name strengths and potential growth areas for a writer.

Now is the time for you to evaluate your own writing for the short film journey! Fill in the blanks below to reflect on the experience. Then swap with a friend for them to provide feedback on your story too.

## REMEMBER!

**This reflective and evaluative process is not about you picking on yourself or putting down someone's efforts as a writer. Comments and suggestions need to be written kindly and enable us to feel empowered, encouraged and accomplished.**



What do I like the most about my story for short film?

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What do I believe my strengths are in the writing process?

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What elements of writing for short film are growth areas for me?

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What would I do differently if I could do this again?

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## PEER EVALUATION

What I liked most about this story/plot was?

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What strengths do you believe this writer has?

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What do you believe is a potential growth area for this writer?

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## SECTION 10

### SAMPLE SCRIPT



'Customer Service' was developed into a script by young filmmakers, based on an idea from Chester P, as part of AFTRS' School Holiday program.

#### SCENE 1.INT.DAY.GLORIAS KITCHEN/LOUNGE

An old fashioned kitchen. Hands prepare a cup of tea in methodic meticulousness: teabag, hot water, sugar, milk – jiggling and stirring. Biscuits are arranged on a sideplate. The old lady (GLORIA) struggles slowly out of the room carrying her bounty – into the lounge room where she sits down in a comfy-chair. Reaching for reading glasses she turns her attention to a brand new Xbox controller. Focusing she presses a button. Nothing.

GLORIA(MUTTERING)  
Goodness me...nothing is  
happening. Maybe it's this  
button...?

She presses a second button and a third. Still nothing. Exasperated she presses all the other buttons before, in frustration she puts down the controller and reaches for the phone-book. She looks up a number and dials. The phone rings.

FADE TO TITLE CARD:

"Customer Service"

#### SCENE 2.INT.DAY.CALL CENTRE

The phone is ringing,continuous from scene 1. BRYAN is lounging at his workstation. Feet up, big bowl of dorritos and massive slurpee cup attest to his healthy lifestyle. Another mouthful of doritos as he focuses on the game he is playing on his mobile device. The phone is still ringing.

At length he finally puts down the device and answers the call on his headset.

#### SCENE 3.INT.DAY.SPLIT SCREEN OF PHONE CALL/GLORIAS LOUNGE

As BRYAN answers the call the screen splits into two with GLORIA on the other end of the line. BRYANS answer to the call is bored and mechanical

BRYAN  
Hello, Senior Trainee Assistant  
Customer Service Technician Bryan,  
how may I help you?

GLORIA  
Hello dear. I bought a new console  
from your store yesterday and now I  
want to watch Sound Of Music on it  
but I cant get it to work. I've  
made myself a cuppa and biscuits to  
have with it but it won't work.  
Would you be able to help me, love?

BRYAN  
Ah yeah...just navigate to the TV  
menu and press X.

GLORIA  
Sorry, could you repeat that dear  
I'm a bit hard of hearing

BRYAN  
...just navigate to the TV menu and  
press X.

GLORIA  
...press whatnow...?

BRYAN  
press X

GLORIA  
So I just navigate to the TV menu

you say...?

BRYAN  
yeah, thats right. Navigate to the  
tv menu and press X.

GLORIA  
All right love, I'm just writing it  
down now.....(pause)....so I just -  
navigate to the TV menu...

BRYAN  
...and press X.

GLORIA  
...and press X....so you think that  
will work, will it?

BRYAN  
Yeah, just navigate to the tv menu  
and press X thats all you need to  
do.

GLORIA  
All right, love, I'll give it a  
whirl, thanks ever so much!

BRYAN  
No worries, good luck.

The screen unplits and we are left with Bryan. He fills his  
mouth with an obscene amount of Dorritos and resumes his  
game.

#### SCENE 4.INT.DAY.SPLIT SCREEN OF PHONE CALL/GLORIAS LOUNGE

We see GLORIA staring at her TV. She presses buttons at it  
but to no avail. We see that the screen is black. She puts  
down the controller and picks up the phone again. She dials  
and the phone rings. Split screen.

BRYAN ignores phone whilst it rings. He sighs and  
eventually picks up the phone.

BRYAN  
Hello, Senior Trainee Assistant  
Customer Service Technician Bryan,  
how may I help you?

GLORIA  
Beg your pardon Brian, I'm afraid  
the tele is still black even after  
I have pressed X.

BRYAN  
Have you turned the TV on?

GLORIA  
No I havent, do I have to do that?

BRYAN  
Yeah, the TV has to be on and so  
does the console...

GLORIA  
oh, silly me of course they do  
thanks for your help, I'll get  
right to it.

Gloria hangs up, and walks to the back of the tv. She pulls  
the cord up to her face and slowly inspects the cord.

#### SCENE 5.INT.DAY.MONTAGE OF CALL CENTRE/GLORIAS LOUNGE

We see a continous stream of cuts as GLORIA calls BRYAN  
again and again to help her every step of the way.

Gloria plugging in cord. Gloria on the phone. Gloria writing  
down H-D-M-I. Gloria inspecting the end of cables. Gloria

putting batteries into controller. Gloria sipping her tea.  
Gloria looking puzzled. Gloria pushing buttons.

Bryan playing his game and putting it down. Bryan answering  
a call. Bryan spelling out H-D-M-I. Bryan eating Dorritos.  
Bryan looking exasperated. Bryan miming plugging in a cable.  
Bryan looking angry. Bryan drawing a picture of an ugly old  
lady

End of montage on GLORIA picking up phone and dialling.

SCENE 6.INT.DAY.SPLIT SCREEN OF PHONE CALL/GLORIAS LOUNGE

Split screen. Bryan angrily throws down his game and answers  
the call. His mouth is full of Dorritos.

BRYAN

Can you stop calling me every two  
minutes, you stupid old dingbat!  
Find someone else to annoy - I'm  
sick of answering your moronic  
questions!

He angrily signs off leaving GLORIA stunned on the line.

SCENE 7.INT.DAY.SPLIT SCREEN OF PHONE CALL/GLORIAS LOUNGE

Gloria puts down the phone slightly crestfallen. She sits  
down and mutters to herself.

GLORIA

Well I never.....! How terribly  
rude.

She sits back thinking for a few seconds.

GLORIA

I suppose I could call my grandson.  
He knows about all that newfangled  
HDRI stuff....

She picks up the phone and dials a number.

We see the name Grandma come up on a phone. A hand picks up  
the phone and we reveal that it is BRYANS mobile.

FREEZE AND FADE TO BLACK.