

## SCRIPT TO SCREEN

### Paerangi | Video 3 – Story Elements

[intro music]

#### *Structuring a film*

[00:00:11 Karin Williams, Producer] It's very important to think about structure in a story for screen. Now sometimes people get confused about structure and they think it just means a three act structure or they think it means that they're being forced into some sort of a box or constraint. Actually, having a great structure can really free you to tell a story. Most great screenwriters and storytellers will always begin with planning, and that involves figuring out a beginning – where I'm starting from, what happens to the character on the way to the end. Sometimes you may not always know exactly what happens in the end but you need to have a pretty good idea of where you're going.

[00:00:53 Hamish Bennett, Screenwriter/Director] Boiled down to it, most stories follow the same structure: you meet a person, you put them up a tree, you throw stones at them, and you get them down again; that's essentially pretty much every story of any film that you'll see on screen. So, basically you meet a character and you see their day to day life, then you put them in a situation where that normal day to day life has been ripped out from under them (so, you put them up a tree), then you make that life more difficult for them (you throw stones at them). Some of those stones they're gonna dodge, some of those stones they're gonna get hit by, but the going's gonna be tough. Eventually they're gonna get out of that tree, and more often than not they will have survived and they will have come out of that tree changed in some way, and in quite a profound way. Those are the basic building blocks of any story.

[00:01:53 Marina Alofagia McCartney, Screenwriter] Here we have a visual storytelling glossary. These are important terms and concepts that you will need to understand if you decide you want to make your own film, write your own film. These are very simple definitions as well, so maybe pause here and have a quick read of them, and then also please learn about these and research them in your own time as well.

When writing a film you will need to understand the structure of the film, and we'll have a quick look at a feature film structure, the three-act structure, which is associated with Syd Field. The three-act structure has three acts: in act one there is a setup, it's usually around 30 minutes long and it establishes the main characters, the relationships, and their world; act two is confrontation, which is about 60 minutes, and you have rising action—so, the protagonist and the main character attempt to resolve the dilemma which is introduced in the first act; and then you have act three which is about 30 minutes long, and the protagonist faces and then usually overcomes the dilemma, and a new normal is established.

So, we have particular points in a film that are really important to hit. In the first act, the beginning, setup, there is what we call an inciting incident, and it's the moment the protagonist's world changes in a dramatic way—the conflict is introduced. Then, plot point one, just before you move into act 2, it's the point of no return: the protagonist leaves their life as it was and it's the moment the setup finishes, the story ends, and act one is over. Then we head to the middle of act two, which is a mid-point, what we call the mid-point, and it's an important scene in the middle of the film, the middle of the script, and it's often a reversal of fortune so it changes the direction of the story. Then we move to plot point two, and this is usually a low point for the protagonist, her actions since the middle have caused disaster but it's also here that she becomes determined to reach her goal—she discovers something that's going to help her finish the mission.

Then we head into act three where we have the climax, so this is where the protagonist finishes the biggest obstacle in the story, it's the high point of physical and/or emotional action, and then we reach the resolution and it's the descending part of the story, it's the end. The third act is complete, the protagonist has transformed, all issues are resolved, the audience sees a new status quo or what the future holds for the character, and the character at the end is not the same as the character at the beginning.

So, we've looked at a three-act structure for a feature film but how does that apply to a short film? Having an understanding of these different parts of a film structure: act one, act two, act three / beginning, middle, and end, is going to help you think about your structure for your short film. So, some of the things to think about in terms of that set up, what is your character's normal? Then the inciting incident is introduced (conflict) but because of the time, the setup and the inciting incident can sometimes happen simultaneously. So, one of the things I suggest you do is read as many short scripts as you can and watch as many short films as you can, and think about—what is the

setup and what is the inciting incident where the conflict is introduced? Then there should be obstacles, and these develop the dramatic action, so what are these obstacles and what are the obstacles to the protagonist's goal? Is there a mid-point which changes the direction in your short film script? Then, what is the height of emotional and physical intensity, what is the climax? And then, how is the action resolved and what is the new normal at the end of the short film?

[00:06:21 Hamish Bennett, Screenwriter/Director] So, just applying that really basic structure to one of my short films, *Ross and Beth*, at the start we meet a man, and that man is Ross, and we get to understand his day to day life. His life is a life of routine: he lives with his beloved wife, Beth, he milks cows, he drinks tea at the kitchen table, so he lives a life of real routine—it's monotonous but it's comfortable and it's the only life he's ever known. Then we put Ross up a tree. In this case Ross' beloved wife, Beth, dies, and the world that Ross knew has turned completely upside-down, he's left floundering, you know, we're throwing stones at him now, he's lost his daughter, she's not gonna be there to support him, he's got no one to turn to, he's struggling on but the routine is no longer there. This young boy turns up and he's annoying and Ross just kind of wants to get rid of him, so we're throwing stones at him and we're making his life more difficult, and although he sees this kid as just another obstacle, we finally get him out of that tree again. We find out that this young fella had a strong friendship with Beth and he's not going anyway, he's gonna be there to help Ross. So, as much as Beth is no longer there, he finally sees some light at the end of the tunnel—he's got someone there who he can, I guess, share the memory of Beth with, and so as much as he's still gonna battle, he's gonna be okay. We've put him a tree, we've thrown stones at him, and we've got him down again.

[00:08:09 Marina Alofagia McCartney, Screenwriter] Some of the ways you can think about the answers to the questions posed, are to ask. Look at these questions. So, in terms of developing your story, think about who is your protagonist, right? What is the dramatic question? So, what is the protagonist's goal? For example, will the protagonist get the girl? Will Frodo return and destroy the ring in Mount Doom? Will Moana return the heart of Te Fiti, and save her village? What is the normal, right? What is the status quo for the protagonist before the conflict is introduced, and what is the protagonist's dilemma? Why can't the protagonist achieve their goal right now? So, what are those obstacles? What is the inciting incident? What happens that challenges the normal, that challenges the status quo and launches the protagonist into their journey? What does the protagonist need? This is different to what the protagonist wants. So, in terms of what the protagonist wants, what does the protagonist desire? And that's connected to the dramatic question, and it's usually an external goal. Then, in terms of what the protagonist needs, it's usually different to what the protagonist wants, and at times this tends to be an internal goal—it's something the protagonist needs to learn and often they don't realise this until the end of the film. What are the obstacles? What is stopping the protagonist from reaching their goal and what is the theme? And this tends to be connected to the protagonist's needs. What are the stakes, what will the protagonist lose if they don't achieve their goal? If there are no stakes, there's no conflict and you don't really have a film.

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### **Structuring a web series**

[00:10:14 Shoshana McCallum, Screenwriter/Actor] As with most story formats like television and film, a great web series is best with very clear structure, or, to put it really simply, a beginning, middle, and end. In television, shows are either serialised, where the audience follows a main story over an entire arc of a series, or they're episodic, which means for the most part the same characters and the same setting, but there's a new plot every episode—and a web series is no different—think *Fleabag* versus *The Simpsons* or *Breaking Bad* versus *Seinfeld*. If you have a serialised idea, a good way to tackle this to first think about the series, is maybe as entire story or a feature film that you can then break up into episodic chunks.

So, let's take a classic *Rites of Passage* tale:

- Episode 1: When Annie's best friend, Lillian, gets engaged, she feels bad about herself and her own problematic life.
- Episode 2: Annie meet's Lillian's perfect new friend, Helen, and gets sucked into a game of one-up-man-ship that she cannot win.
- Episode 3: Instead of sorting out her problems, Annie fixates on Helen. Their competition for Lillian's affection turns Annie into a terrible friend.

- Episode 4: Lillian replaces Annie with Helen as her matron of honour. Annie flips out, her life is far worse than when we first met her.
- Episode 5: Annie realises her problems were around far longer than Helen has been; she need to sort out her life.
- Episode 6: Helen now has a problem, she's lost the bride, but because Annie really is Lillian's closest friend, she can find her and save the wedding day.

So, over these six episodes there's a very clear story with a beginning, middle, and end, however, it's not as simple as just cutting up a feature film or cutting up one big story; each episode also needs a beginning, middle, and end. If you simply chop up a larger story, it will get flabby, it will get lost, and the audience is going to click over to something else. For example, episode 1, when Annie's best friend, Lillian, gets engaged and Annie feels bad about her own problematic life, the structure of this episode could look like:

#### Episode 1

- Setup: We introduce Annie in her lacklustre life—we see her bad boyfriend, we meet her awful flatmates, we visit her at her boring job. Now we throw a problem at her: her best friend is getting married. Yes, Annie's happy for Lillian, but it does really highlight how crappy her life is going.
- Resolution: Lillian asks Annie to be her maid of honour and Annie says yes. Even though she's failing at everything else, she's not going to fail at this, she's going to be the best bridesmaid there has ever been.

#### Episode 2

- Setup: Annie meets Lillian's perfect friend, Helen. The problem, Helen is secretly as insecure as Annie, and this plays out by the two competing for Lillian's affection.
- Resolution: We leave Annie utterly humiliated at an engagement party when she loses the childish 'who's closer to Lillian' game with Helen.

Okay, so what if you don't have a serialised idea? What happens if your idea is episodic? You've got a great set of characters, you've got a great setting, but episode to episode your story tends to restart. This is awesome because the nature of web series is that usually all episodes are available at once and not having to play them out in a set order is actually to your advantage. You want your audience to be watching their pirated full eps of *The Mindy Project* on YouTube and then, bam, your episode comes up next, and they're like, 'oh I'll give it a go' and it doesn't matter that it's season 2, episode 4; they can get into it, they can watch it, they can love it. While your episodes might not have storylines that keep the audience clicking on the next one, they will be coming back for your loveable characters and your interesting situations, and they'll want to explore those over and over again.

But while the story arc, the feature film or the larger story isn't as important, it's still very important to pay attention from episode to episode and make sure that each episode has a solid structure. So, for example, Homer is living his life, something out of the ordinary happens which causes a problem for Homer. With a little help from his family and friends Homer can overcome this problem and maybe learn a thing or two new about himself. So, does your series have maybe a little bit of both? It has overarching story elements but also each episode has self-contained stories that restart every time. That's great because most stories do have those elements, think *Parks and Recreation*, *The Office*, we tune in primarily for the laughs and for the shenanigans, we really do want to see the satisfying character development that *does* engage the viewer. So, in this situation I'd tackle the series as a whole, and the individual episodes separately, just like you did with the serial structure but tailoring the episodic storylines within each ep alongside your serial storylines. For example, *The Office* season 1 mainly dealt with a new plot every episode, but it took care to develop the relationship between Jim and Pam over one or two beats that fit in with the self-contained stories.

Now I've mainly used film and television shows as examples in the hope that as many as you as possible have seen them, but things to remember specifically for web series:

1. Keep it short: People usually watch web series on smaller devices in pockets of free time. They're not looking for the *Titanic*, they want something sharp and clever and usually funny.
2. Keep it simple. Because web series are often shorter in duration, there usually isn't time to delve into complicated plots and confusing characters in a satisfying way.
3. Keep it going. The structure needs to be doing two things at any point in time—be entertaining in its own right and drive the story forward in a meaningful way. If it's not doing both, take another look at it.

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## **Characters**

[00:16:39 Sophie Henderson, Screenwriter] A good screenplay is all about character. Character is everything: it's where I start with my screenplay and I think it makes or breaks a script. If you think about screenplays you've read or films you've watched, the character is what you care about, that's what you'll remember, and when I talk about character, I'm talking about the essence of a person, who they are, and all the details that make them special—who they are at their core.

[00:17:08 Hamish Bennett, Screenwriter/Director] I really love the character development process, it is probably the most fun part of the process for me because characters and people are the thing that I'm most drawn to in stories. In this respect, just take your time here, makes lots of notes. I often fill up 1B5 notebook after 1B5 notebook of ideas, and it's just my way of purging all of these different thoughts about who these characters are, but don't underestimate or undervalue the use of the time that's needed to do this. If you get your characters right, then your story is going to flow from there, but if your character is underdrawn and you don't know that character that well, you're going to start running into issues when your story gets underway. So, don't start your scripts or your screenplay too early, get your characters right, and that's not just your main characters, that's all the characters around them. Know them back to front, you've got to know them so well that you're gonna know how they respond in certain situations, you put them into a certain situation and you know how this person talks. Know them *that* well. When you've got that and you're feeling ready to burst, that's when you're gonna start doing your writing.

Characters are where it all starts for me. When I talk about the seed of a story and the beginnings of a story, my stories are always gonna start with a character. You can start with a concept, you know, it's not the only way to start a story, but for me it makes a lot more sense to start with the people. Once again, going back to that idea that you've got to care about the people you're writing about. If you don't know those people in-depth, if you don't have a really strong understanding of those people, then it's gonna be pretty difficult for an audience to have that connection or that understanding of them.

[00:19:02 Sophie Henderson, Screenwriter] Not all writers start from character but I will follow the character to find the story, rather than the other way around. I don't think it's a good idea to put a story on top of a character, because the character will tell you where to go, and part of that is about having a character who wants something. That way, the character and structure go hand in hand. The characters will make these choices for me and then the character will organically show me who they are. And I think the only way that you know who someone is, is through what they do—through their actions. I mean, you can tell me about your character and you can write about how great they are and what they're like, but it's through their actions that we'll actually know them, and it's really important first of all, to have an active character. The story can't be happening to that person; that person needs to be driving the story: their decisions and choices and their want creates the story, rather than the other way around. And if they're not driving the story, then maybe it's not their film.

I've had a situation where I thought that my character was the lead character because the story was about them, but actually none of their actions were making the story happen, so if you took that character out of the story then the story would still happen without them, and you've got a big problem then. Another really important thing is point of view, like whose point of view is this story? When I talk about point of view I'm talking about, whose story is it and whose perspective is it from? Usually I will only give one character's point of view—this means that anything that happens in the film, they have to be there, they have to see it, and it's just a great limitation to stick to and give that character the space that they deserve.

What makes me care about someone is their humour, their humanity, their weirdness. I think I'm really attracted to characters who are outsiders, who are a little bit odd. I think they deserve to be onscreen because they're not usually. I think ask yourself, what makes my character memorable? How can you make them stay with the audience? What are they good at? What are they bad at? What do they fear? How do they change? Most importantly, what does your character want? What is their motivation in this story? And if you have the answer to this, then the rest of your story just falls into place—because, your character's active because they're trying to get something, it creates a structure for you as they try and do all the things to get what they want. For example, I want to go home to Kansas, I want to find Nemo, I want to escape my marriage, I want to provide for my family, I want to kill the six-fingered man; like all these characters have such a strong kind of primal want, that you want to see if they can achieve it.

[00:22:23 Hamish Bennett, Screenwriter/Director] What does your character love, and conversely, what is it that they hate? What are your character's fears, what are they most scared of? Who are the people in your character's lives, who are closest to, where do they live, what's your character's normal day to day life like, and what is something that could really upset that day to day life? When you start asking these questions, this is where the true journey of your story begins.

[00:22:52 Sophie Henderson, Screenwriter] Maybe pause, let's pause and grab a piece of paper, I'm gonna make you do an exercise through the power of video. What I want you to do is write non-stop for five minutes. Get a piece of paper and a pen and your pen is not allowed to leave the bit of paper. I want you to just write about your character: I want you to write about their childhood, their hobbies, their relationship, their age; everything that you can think of that you already know, and then you're gonna run out of things you know and you're gonna have to make them up. Some of that will be terrible, and that's okay, but the main thing is you're not allowed to stop writing. Another thing that's important is their flaws, their weaknesses. I think they're not a real person if they don't have weaknesses. What are their strengths? What kind of shoes do they wear? And then once you've done this exercise, like where did they go school? So many – like anything you can think of, chuck it in there – little, tiny details.

Do that now, pause the video and do this. I want you to read back over it and I want you to circle things that you've discovered, the new things that just came out of your brain in that exercise and the things that get to you, that like mean something to you, and hold onto those. I want you to also look at anything that's come up that makes the character similar to you—because this story is coming from you, you can't help but put your own voice, your own opinions into it, and I think the more of yourself you pour into your character, the better. You know, the more vulnerable you can be about your own opinions your own fears, your own choices, things that hurt you, that make you wanna cry, like put those into your script I think, because they'll be relatable to other people who are too scared to say those kind of things. Yeah, I think the more you put of yourself into your script, the more your script can only be written by you, and that's what will make it stand out.

[00:25:24 Hamish Bennett, Screenwriter/Director] A really good place to start developing our own compelling characters is in your real life. We're surrounded by interesting people so, you know, watch them and be observant and ask them questions. Start making notes and soon, as you start to think more about people like this, they start to take on a life of their own, and what began as a seed, that began a truth, that began in a real person, it soon becomes a fictional character that is wholly unique. So, you can take some of those core qualities of that person and start creating your own fictional character, you know, you can embellish and change and add. Think about all of those little details: where do they come from, what's their home life, what are their loves, what are their passions, what are the things they're most scared of? This is all really useful and where the really fun stuff starts to happen.

As an example, the two main characters in *Ross and Beth*, they're based on my childhood neighbours growing up. The dairy farming couple across the road, whose names were Ross and Beth oddly enough, they had a lot to do with me and my brothers' lives growing up. We'd go over there and help them with rearing calves and things like that, and the more time I spent with them, the more I noticed certain things about them. They didn't have a lot of nice things to say to each other, most of the time they were just giving each other a hard time, but you could see that underneath all those layers of banter, the cheeky talk amongst each other, that there was a real depth of loyalty and a real depth of dependence on one another. I guess the story of *Ross and Beth* began for me with imagining how Ross would cope if Beth was to suddenly go, and as much as that was a fictional element that I added there, the seed of the idea began with my childhood neighbours.

[music]

## **Genre**

[00:27:21 Sophie Henderson, Screenwriter] A good idea to start with is genre, whether that is comedy, drama, romance, adventure, action, horror, thriller, it'll help you make decisions as you go along. Think about what genre's you love and you always look for when you're deciding what to watch. Your genre might change, it might start as a comedy, turn into a black comedy, a romantic comedy, or then just a drama with funny bits, but a film genre promises something to an audience; it sets up an expectation when you choose to watch something of a certain genre. Like a comedy promises laughter a fun, a romance promises kissing, a horror promises scares, a musical promises the song and dance number, and I think you can subvert genre conventions and blur genres together, but I think it's important to really know the rules before you break them.

I want you to pause me and grab a piece of paper and pen, and I want you to write down 20 films that inspire you. It doesn't matter what their genre, different genres is good. Write that list and then I want you to go through and write the genre next to all of those titles. Really try and be specific: is it a romantic comedy, is it a human comedy, what kind of thriller is it—is it a psychological thriller, domestic thriller? Get specific with that and then see if you can figure out why, like what are the things about it that definitely make it that? Think about all the genres that could work for your story, like what if you just wildly chose a different genre, what would that do to it, how would that push it into a new place, and bring up something exciting and change it up, give it some kind of edge? Once you've decided on your genre I think it's now time to research it and find out all the tropes that make up that genre: what does it need to deliver that the genre always promises?

I think I will always, when I'm working on a script, come up with some like titles or reference films that are similar to mine or have the same feeling. Genre and reference films help people understand the tone of your story and imagine the feeling of it as they're reading. You don't have to think about your genre at the beginning, it might emerge as you go, but I think genre can make you stand out as a filmmaker, it can help establish your tone and style and your voice. You can use that tone through all your documents. I want to see a logline that's funny if your film is a comedy, I want to see a synopsis that's funny if it's a comedy, or if it's a thriller, that it leaves me feeling a little ooh, ooh. Don't forget to do that and in everything you write about your film.

Here's a slide with some of the many genres. Have a little pause, we're putting up the definitions for you, and some of them overlap.

[music]

### **World**

[00:30:57 Dianne Taylor, Screenwriter] Thinking about how you create a world on page, and I'm going to use the example of *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (which just happens to be a favourite film of mine) and look at the very specific language that is used in the script that really paints a world very succinctly. So, if we just look at scene one here, we've got Mildred Hayes, our central character, driving along a country road. She passes an old billboard and notices that it's all faded and torn, and just look at some of the language that's used here: "ramshackle." That one word just tells us quite a lot, and then if you look at the line after that, "she stops at the first, then at all three stretching away to the quiet horizon," you know, very succinctly again just in two words, the "quiet horizon." "She makes a mental note and drives on, leaving the three old billboards alone like tombstones on the dusty road." It's very evocative, really painting a picture of quite a desolate sort of feeling.

Then in scene two we've got this character Red Welby who's a young guy, pretending to read a Penguin classic as he observes the office hottie, Pamela, pass in a cute dress. Mildred strides in, "you Red Welby?", "yes mam, how may I..." and she cuts him off, "they said those three billboards out on Drinkwater Road, you're in charge of renting them out, that right?" So, looking at the language that these characters are using, we can see again that it's a pretty robust world and not a politically correct one. Red's saying there, "oh they're retards," "quick ain't ya, Welby", and then Mildred really cuts to the chase talking about the swearwords that can't be said. Look at where Mildred says, "why don't you draw up a little contract betwixt us while you're at it." Betwixt isn't a word that I am used to hearing in daily conversation, but it really helps to create a sense of a unique place.

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### **Theme**

[00:33:31 Dianne Taylor, Screenwriter] Theme was something that used to puzzle me, and it used to bother me that people would say, what's the theme of your story? And often I just didn't know. I've realised now that theme is often something that you come to when you've been working on your story for a while. It's the thing that transcends the specifics of the story and resonates on a more universal level. So, you might have a very specific story about a mother and a daughter, and maybe you might think, well, the theme is mother/daughter relationships, but maybe further down the track you might discover that your theme is actually about our inability to tell the truth to the people that we love the most. There are an infinite number of themes and it's really about what connects from anywhere in the world, to your story, it's about the stuff that transcends specifics, so it can be things like family relationships, it could be love, grief, basic human needs—what is it to be human? And to me it's where you really connect with the audience. So, think about a film, think about *Whale Rider* and the little girl, Pai's speech in *Whale Rider*, it's incredibly specific to that story, to that place, to her relationship with her grandfather, but at the same time it makes us cry because the

emotions that she's expressing are universal, so it can connect us to our relationship with our own father, or our own grandfather. It's the stuff that comes up inside us because we know what it's like to feel that.

So yeah, like I said, don't worry too much about theme at the start, because it is something that I think sometimes you just have to discover as you go on. On the other hand, sometimes theme might be the place that you start. You might find that you're very interested in a particular theme, it could be connectedness or retribution or moving on, and you might go, I'm fascinated with this theme, and then you'll use that as your starting point to actually dig in and find your story that's going to help you express that theme. Yeah, theme can be a tricky one but as I say, at first, just don't worry too much if you don't know what it is, it will come in time, and when you find it, then you will actually hit the pay dirt, cos it's that stuff that really connects your story to the whole world out there.

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*The first part of the homework for this video tutorial is to choose one of your story ideas from the previous video's homework to do more work on. Using your gut instinct and what you've learnt in this video, choose the story idea that you feel is most suitable for the screen. Answer these questions: Who is the protagonist? Who is the antagonist—is it a person or are there antagonistic forces at play? What is the genre? What is the theme? Describe the tone and world. The second part of the homework is to read the script for Hamish Bennett's short film, Ross and Beth, and then watch the film. You'll find the links below.*

*Also check out the other projects in the watchlist below.*