

SCRIPT TO SCREEN

Paerangi | Video 5 – Script Mechanics

[intro music]

Formatting a script

[0:00:08 Shoshana McCallum, Screenwriter/Actor] There's a very specific way to format a script and, because it's so specific, anyone anywhere who is familiar with this, can pick up a script and understand the writer's intentions. Anyone collaborating on your film or your series, the director, the producer, the art department, or the actor, can immediately understand what is required of them to bring your idea to life. First of all you will need a scriptwriting app. Most professionals use Final Draft, but don't worry about getting it because it's very expensive and there are lots of free ones, free alternatives that you can use instead. Have a look what's on offer. I have used Celtx in the past and that does the job. Once you have found the scriptwriting app we can have a look at a sample of a script. You might have to take your time to familiarise yourself with the scriptwriting app that you decide on, because there's tonnes of shortcuts and specific ways of setting up your page of script, but in general it always does look like this.

Up the top of the script is a number and this number is called the 'scene number'. It's important to put in the scene number so that you can easily locate the scene that everyone needs to pay attention to because it's a very collaborative medium. The bold and underlined piece of text, that's called the 'scene heading', it's there to indicate as much about the scene as possible. On this particular example it says 'EXT.', and that means 'exterior', so that means that *this* scene, immediately everyone looking at this scene knows that this scene is going to be set outside. It then says, 'GREG'S HOME', so it's outside Greg's home, and then at the last piece it says, 'EVENING' so we know what time of day it is. It's very easy for whoever's doing locations and scheduling, they can immediately look at the scene heading and go, yep, I've got all the information I need.

The next up would be big print. So, the big print is your description and your action line; it's the important information that isn't conveyed in the dialogue but is really important for the reader to understand. Next is characters. So, you'll see a name kind of in the middle column of this document, it says 'Leo' and then 'Greg', 'Leo', then 'Greg'. Leo is the name of the person that is talking (and it sits in the middle of the page) and then directly underneath that is dialogue, and that is what he is saying. The reason they're formatted like that is so the actors can easily read it. They will be rehearsing, they will be doing table reads, and they need to be able to look at their page and find themselves immediately.

You can see once or twice on the sample script there is a little clue underneath the character, but before the dialogue and parentheses. That is the dialogue description and that is not necessary to a script, but it's just a helpful extra clue if your line is nuanced for example, and you want to make sure your actor delivers it the way you imagine so the script continues to make sense.

[music]

Big print and writing visually

[0:03:30 Shoshana McCallum, Screenwriter/Actor] Your big print is a very useful tool for the read, the actors, the director, to better understand what it is you want to convey. Like dialogue, there aren't perfect rules for writing big print. From script to script, depending on tone, writer, story, the big print's job will subtly change.

[0:03:49 Dianne Taylor, Screenwriter] Look at the *Three Billboards* script, what you see here in scene one is purely description and we sometimes call that the big print. I don't know of anyone who knows exactly why it's call the big print, it just is, but that is the description of what we're seeing. 'She notices this one a little more, she slows to a stop'. What you are doing is you are telling the reader exactly what the audience is seeing. Cut to the chase very quickly, use as few words as possible, and keep it moving forward. Make some mental notes—'drives on', not 'she is driving again', just 'drives on', so look at cutting words, look at keeping it succinct.

When your script gets read by people they are looking for a certain style and a way of writing that takes them right into the story. Now, one of the main ways that we do this is always writing in the present tense. A novel can be written in the past tense, 'she went to the dance, she saw this guy across the room' da-da-da; with film it's always present tense.

[0:05:11 Shoshana McCallum, Screenwriter/Actor] Here are some tips to big print by:

- 1) Show, don't tell: A massive tip for anything on TV and film in general, but we're going to watch the series, not read it. Even when you're reading it, we want you to be watching it in your heads, if that makes sense. Create images and actions that leap off the page.
- 2) Even though big print is often used to describe something, try and think of it as active as possible—how can you give your scene movement and vibrancy?
- 3) Big print is big clues, cram as much as you can into your big print. For example, instead of saying, 'Suzanne opened the door quietly and walked in the house', you *could* say, 'Suzanne creaked open the door and slunk into the house undetected'—it's using your big print as much to your advantage as you can.
- 4) Only put in big print what can actually be seen and heard: There will be exceptions to this but general rule of thumb is, this is a working document, its job is to show something. I know what Tracey with a twinkle in her eye looks like, but I don't know what Tracey who owns a boat but we met her at the dentist looks like.
- 5) The best big print is where you can pull out the outer expression of the inner experience: he sighs, he gasps, he creeps.

[0:06:45 Hamish Bennett, Screenwriter/Director] You can write what you see and what you hear but you can't write inner feelings, what's going on—that's prose, that's a book, that's not a screenplay. So, as an example, you can't say 'a warm feeling of utter love for his wife washes over Ross' face', you can't say that because we can't see that happening to Ross, but we can say, 'a slight smile passes over Ross' face, the first we've seen from him'. That's describing what Ross is doing, but what I hope you're trying to convey is the love that is in that really small but profound gesture. I've got a bit of a rule where I try and keep it to four lines; if I have over four lines I will usually try and break it up so I've got a couple of paragraphs. You'll see at the top of page 2 there's two paragraphs there both four lines long.

More than anything I think you've got to try to avoid as a writer, making your script too dense, and if you look at a page and there is line after line of screen direction and very little dialogue, there's not a lot of space on the page. Looking at it just from a visual point of view, it's nicer to look at, it's cleaner to look at if you have space between everything. That's a personal preference but it's something that I try to keep to. Every now and again I veer into five lines but I very much try to stick to four lines or less when I'm describing things.

One of the great things I think about a screenplay where you can't describe what's going on inside a character's mind, is that it forces you as a writer to look at your story from a very visual point of view, and film is a visual medium so you are forced to look at it in the same way that the audience looks at it. It means that you need to work a bit harder with your script, you need to try and convey a lot with a little, but that's a challenge that needs to be overcome because film is a visual and an oral medium, that's what it deals in.

On pages 5 and 6 of the script there's a couple of examples there of ways, I suppose, I try to convey that feeling of loss but without the character saying it. These characters are Ross and Beth, they're not the types of people who wear their hearts on their sleeve, they don't say that they're feeling sad—they're not those kinds of people—so, you've got to look for other ways to convey that sadness. You can use all sorts of things: you can use the environment as one example, and if you look on page 5 about halfway down, it's 'EXT. CEMETERY - DAY', it starts off with 'the thrum of heavy rain beating down steadily and intensifies', you know, just that idea of the heavy rain beating down, that's enough for me, that builds a feeling of sadness or it builds a feeling of loss. Later on after Beth has died, at the bottom of page 5 'the screen fades into the familiar thump of the milking machine. The radio is still playing, but it's much hazier than before. Ross toils away in the pit, replacing cups. Outside, the iron grey sky threatens to burst'.

It's getting a little flowery near the end there but what I'm trying to convey there is, again, that feeling of complete desperation and loss, and we've got things like the radio playing but it's a lot hazier than it was before, you've got Ross toiling, you've got the iron grey sky outside; these are all things you try to use to convey that feeling of sadness.

On page 6, the top of page 6, 'Ross releases the gate for the first lot of cows. They're reluctant to go and it takes some furious, out-of-character barks from the dog to get them moving. The radio is now just static noise.' The confusion that Ross feels in the aftermath of Beth dying, I try to convey in ways like the static from the radio. When we actually filmed Ross and Beth we weren't able to get a dog (the farm we filmed on didn't have a dog) and my plan was for this dog to be silent when Ross and Beth were both together, when Beth was still alive, and then barking furiously after she'd passed away. Obviously that didn't work out but we still went with the radio and we made that radio staticky and hazy because Ross doesn't have anyone to tell people that he's sad, he doesn't have anyone to say he's sad to, so we try and show it in other means. That's using film as a visual and oral medium.

Another way I was trying to convey the rhythm and the harmony in their life, page 4, about halfway down the page 'Ross and Beth both wipe their hands on their overalls, then reach for their jars of tea at the same time as the dog silently herds the next lot in. Neither of them is aware of their perfect synchronicity.' In another situation I suppose, where I'm trying to convey harmony without them saying, 'I love you so much, Beth', 'I love you so much, Ross', it's doing it in a more subtle way but in a way which is in keeping with the types of people they are.

I think with a short film one of the other lovely things that you have is the opportunity to make every moment and every element of that screenplay count. There are things that I wanted to plant pretty early on in the story, that pay off later on. At the start in the first scene a little piece of cow shit drops into Beth's tea, and in the last scene on page 11, when Corey the young Māori boy is saying goodbye to Ross, he watches him finish his tea and then he smiles and says, 'When you pissed your wife off, she used to drop a little bit of cowshit in your tea'. I suppose harking back to that first scene and that idea of bookending all of that tragedy with harmony on every side of him, felt like the right thing to do. I also wanted to kind of hark back to that idea that, although Beth is gone, she's not gone from his memory, as in the final lines of the script Corey jumps on his bike and pedals off into the sunrise, Ross watches him go, there's a hint of a smile. The only other time I said there's a hint of a smile is when Beth was talking to him earlier on in, I think scene two. Once again, kind of going back to the impact that Beth had on him, and Corey is I suppose having that same connection with him there.

[music]

Opening Scene - Web series

[0:13:40 Shoshana McCallum, Screenwriter/Actor] The opening scene has to do a number of things: it has to grab the viewer's attention, it has to set up an expectation of what's to come, and it has to entertain and inform. Here are some thoughts of how you can go about giving that a go. First of all, your audience hasn't bought a ticket to the film that they've driven half an hour away to see, nor have they even possibly bothered to turn on the TV and invested in choosing a channel; often they've just clicked on a link in Facebook or let the next video play of whatever else they're watching on YouTube, so you have to grab their attention immediately, and I think in the first 15 seconds would do you really well.

You need to get to the story, the characters, and the problems straight off the bat. Audiences tend to connect with the first people they meet on screen. They want to root for someone and they will attach themselves quickly, assuming that who you put in front of them matters, so make sure that who you put in front of them matters. Give them clues as to who this character is: are they good, are they bad, are they hilarious? This will stop your audience guessing and looking for clues that might not exist. Really start investing in your story. Saying that, a simple illustration of your character's heart, rather than the entire back story in the first opening scene will go a lot further.

Set your tone: If it's a comedy you've got to get the audience laughing in your opening scene, if it's a horror, spook 'em, spook 'em hard, but don't come in with the jokes if in scene two you're gonna find a dead man with no hands.

Theme: Get your theme out there. Your theme is different to plot. It's not the ins and outs of what's gonna happen

during your series; it's what you really want to say. If you want to talk to bravery, if your character's journey is one of courage in the face of adversity, I want to see that in your opening scene. Does he fail to save the dog that runs in front of the car, only for a little boy to save it? Do they scream when they see a shadow of a mouse? Or do they save the girl and then realise the girl's the bad guy? Make sure you get your themes right up front.

Conflict: Conflict is where drama happens, and conflict doesn't necessarily mean punching or shouting, it's just your character coming up against something that pushes back. This does two things: it can give us lots of insight into who your character is, the way they deal with this conflict, and it also alludes to the type of problems that you're going to see in the show. Conflict gives us a lot of information about what the audience is going to need to care about.

Here is the opening scene of the *Baby Mama's Club*: [playing video 0:16:39–0:17:51] Why is this such a great opening scene? In this scene we discover everything we need to know about the show and whether we want to keep watching it. First of all, our lead character has a problem, she's pregnant and the father isn't replying to her texts. Immediately we have a gripping scenario that we all can understand. There are also a few other things that are quite intriguing about this scene that aren't quite so explicit. Our lead is alone in a public bathroom stall and this makes us wonder whether she's gonna have to do this alone, whether this is gonna be a secret that she has to carry through the show. From her costume and her hand sanitising, we might also infer that she's an orderly particular type of person who likes things a certain way, and someone who perhaps isn't going to take well to an unexpected pregnancy. What else? This might be a somewhat adult show: she isn't looking at a pregnancy test 10 minutes after she's taken it; she's pant-less in the toilet, and, while it's not explicit, it does allude to an adulthood that you might expect going forward.

In a very short amount of time we know a lot about this character and her problem, and we care about her and we're very curious about what's going to happen to her. All the elements of the opening scene: the character, the tone, the theme, and the conflict, come together in an entertaining promise for the viewer; the show is worth watching, we should settle in. What you're making is a series for the web, so your audience is going to be on their phones, on their laptops, on their tablets, and they can click off or on to any other link within seconds. They aren't at the movies, they haven't paid for a ticket, you don't have their captive attention for two hours; you have to get them right away because they have every opportunity to leave.

Opening Scene - Short film

[0:19:48 Hamish Bennett, Screenwriter/Director] Opening scenes are obviously really important for a number of reasons, but when I look at *Ross and Beth* as a script, what I wanted that opening scene to do was I wanted it to first of all encapsulate Ross and Beth's relationship, but also convey the sense of harmony and love and beauty in a pretty humble world, so I tried to do that in one page and managed to get there. So, just having a bit of a look at it: 'The screen is black. Titles rise: ROSS AND BETH', and 'As the titles fade a sound emerges, dull and repetitive – WHUMP – WHUMP – WHUMP. A bird calls out, followed moments by a voice, clear and warm. The tui, Radio New Zealand National - it's six am'. A couple of the lines there, that idea of the voice being clear and warm and that rhythm of the whump, whump, whump of the milking machine, these are all things that I wanted to include to convey that sense of harmony and of rhythm.

Just looking at the last piece of description on that page: 'Ross shows no indication that he's listening to Beth; she doesn't appear bothered either way. Outside a dog bounces around, noiselessly herding cows towards the shed'. Once again, it's about establishing rhythm and establishing tone. There is a relationship which doesn't involve a heap of talking, but there's routine there, there's rhythm there and there's absolute love there.

Writing dialogue

[0:21:22 Shoshana McCallum, Screenwriter/Actor] Okay, so this is the icing on the cake. This is the best part for me in writing a script. You've done the hard work, you've put up some problems, you've fixed them, and then you've put up some more problems, and now you get to give your creations a voice.

[0:21:40 Dianne Taylor, Screenwriter] You notice when I'm speaking now I might double-back, or I pause, or I contradict myself, and in film of course you can do all that, but what you don't want is to meander or be repetitive. You're looking for enough of that so that it comes across as natural, it comes across as character, but it's not long-winded.

[0:22:12 Hamish Bennett, Screenwriter/Director] When writing dialogue you've got to keep going back to your character. If you know them really well, then you'll know what sounds right coming out of their mouth. You've got to keep asking yourself the question 'is this something that this character would genuinely say, or is just something I've heard in another film before, or is just a bit of a dialogue that allows me as the writer to kind of advance the plot a bit more quickly?' There's got to be some exposition at times in your dialogue but for the most part you've got to be really hard on yourself and try to have your characters speaking as naturally and as authentically as possible.

[0:22:50 Shoshana McCallum, Screenwriter/Actor] Say it out loud, does it sound natural or does it sound like someone wrote it? Even if you're like, 'ooh, that's a really clever line', is the viewer going to be pulled out of the scene because it doesn't come out particularly natural?

[0:23:05 Dianne Taylor, Screenwriter] So, just look at how succinct this dialogue is here: 'Mildred strides in "you Red Welby?" "yes ma'am, how may I –." She's cutting him off before he even gets a chance to finish the sentence So, think about the way that we overlap; think about, if you look at Red further down the page: 'I didn't know we had any billboards out on – where is Drinkwater Road?' He doesn't even finish his own sentence. And think about the way their dialogue shows you who's got the power in this scene. Look at the way Mildred just keeps cutting across the top of him, he doesn't get a chance to really get to say what he even wants to say.

One thing that can occur with dialogue is it can start to sound a little bit like verbal ping-pong ... back/forward, back/forward, back/forward: yes you did, no I didn't, yes you did. I mean, sometimes that's what it needs to be, but the way that you avoid that is by breaking up the size of people's speeches. So, you might have one character who does talk long and another one who's quite monosyllabic, who will cut across just with very short, snappy answers or comments, or who may in fact say absolutely nothing. So, consider the rhythm when you're writing and try to hear it. Don't worry too much when you're first writing dialogue that you're writing too long. I always write long. Write as long as you want to, it's all about the editing, you've got to come back and go, I've taken three sentences to say something that could have been said in one sentence, and I think if you look at this scene between these two people, you'll see that there is not one word out of place. They are using language very economically and, again, by using very specific language, they're creating character at the same time as moving the story forward.

[0:25:19 Hamish Bennett, Screenwriter/Director] As an example, once again going back to the nature of Ross and Beth's relationship, they don't have a lot of nice things to say to each other—and often what they say in their dialogue is the complete opposite of what you traditionally think of as loving kind of language, but you bury it in the subtext and you include the information between the dialogue points. As an example at the bottom of page 2 when Beth says, 'Tell them to go away if it bothers you so much. Grumpy shit'. On the surface that's pretty harsh, but what follows, that says all we need to know about their relationship: 'A slight smile passes over Ross' face - the first we've seen from him'. It's the first smile we've seen from him and the smile comes immediately after Beth swearing at him. That sums up the nature of their relationship and it's done in a really, I suppose, less obvious way than you could expect.

[0:26:24 Shoshana McCallum, Screenwriter/Actor] In real life people hardly ever say what they mean, and I don't mean that people speak in riddles but people are guarded, they are manipulative, they are embarrassed, and these are the good people! So, what does it say about your character for example, if they were hit by a car and then they went and told their boss they were having a great day? You don't always have to have the character say exactly what they're thinking.

[0:26:43 Dianne Taylor, Screenwriter] One thing that you will hear about dialogue and a criticism of bad dialogue, is that it's expositional, it's basically overtelling the story, sharing too much information. It's where you hear people say something like, 'oh John, so I hear Mary's left you, that must be bad, you're feeling awful'. Think about everything that you can take out and put into action so you're just not telling the story through the dialogue. Sometimes your story is what's sitting underneath the dialogue, so you might have a family sitting around a dinner table and they're talking about the cricket, when really there's something much deeper that they should be talking about, and you know it from their actions that they're avoiding talking about something. Sometimes you have to bury your message, you know, when you've really got a big thing that you want to say, don't put the words directly into that character's mouth, you might need to come at it sideways because this is the way life is—we don't come out and make big speeches.

[0:28:07 Shoshana McCallum, Screenwriter/Actor] So, like most creative things, there's no hard and fast rules, but here are some good tips for when you're starting out.

- Cut to the chase. Don't worry about small talk when you're writing dialogue. Unless it's specific to your character you really don't need it.
- Keep it brief, keep it impactful. If you do end up with lots of dialogue for your character, for example your character is giving a speech or they're really, really talkative and that's part of who they are, then make sure you break up the dialogue on the page with the big print, because it's a lot easier for the actors to read it and find their place.
- Make sure all your characters have unique voices. Think about your friends and family: Is your dad a real chatterbox? Does your brother only speak in annoying rhetorical questions? Is your best friend very polite or does she swear like a sailor? Everyone has a really unique voice, make sure you use that as much as you can through your script.

[0:29:00 Hamish Bennett, Screenwriter/Director] Everyone has a distinct way of talking, and their little mannerisms, they count, they're the things that make a character seem unique and make a character come to life. I think about people that I grew up around, you know, there are some really interesting ways of talking that I still kind of lean on when it comes to writing dialogue. I remember a guy at home where I grew up called 'Creamy'. Creamy was a farmer and he had this really interesting way of talking, and what he'd often say between sentences was, 'yah-yah, yah-yah-yah'. I remember we were talking to him on a side line on a rugby game once and one of the players on the field had put on a bit of weight, and he mentioned this guy (I'll call him Kelvin), he goes 'yah-yah, Kelvin, yah, prime beef, yah!' Now that line 'prime beef' that was enough to ... We still talk about it now, this happened probably about 20 years ago, we still talk about that line now but it's because it's distinct and it's different and it's pretty hilarious too. Pay attention to people like that, because even though I haven't put 'yah-yah' into any of my scripts yet or 'prime beef' I think it's only a matter of time.

Homework

[music]

The homework for this video tutorial is to write the opening scene for your concept—this is the beginning of your script. Use the techniques you've learnt in this video to ensure the scene grabs attention. To do this you'll need to use a program for formatting scripts, for example: Final Draft, Celtx, Highland 2, or Fade In. Links to these will be in the homework PDF. Final Draft is expensive to purchase, whereas there are free versions available of Celtx, Highland 2, and Fade In. It's good practice to start this now, rather than getting used to writing scripts in Microsoft Word or Google Docs and trying to make the formatting look correct. It's easy to tell when a script hasn't been formatted correctly and this will be a distraction for the reader. By all means use Word or Google Docs for your other documents, for example, your synopsis and your director's treatment, anything that isn't script. The script needs to be formatted to the industry standards.