



Thinking creatively: how to write... a film script

Overview: In our last exercise, we looked at making decisions when writing a short story. Our next set of activities looks at solving problems when writing a film script.

Time: 30-60 minutes per activity

Teachers: You can use these activities with a class, as a one-off activity, or as part of a series on developing the life skills 'thinking creatively' and 'solving problems'. You could use these ideas to carry out a class project on making a short film and organise your own mini-Oscars night for best film script.

Learners: You can do these activities on your own, or with a friend. Just follow the instructions!

Level: Intermediate

Introduction: The difference between writing a film script and a story

Writing a film script is not the same as writing a story that's meant to be read. It involves solving a number of problems. Firstly, there is the question of how to write the script itself and how to make the story visually interesting. Secondly, many great films are about characters solving problems. For example, the Sherlock Holmes stories are all about solving mysteries and in *Around the World in Eighty Days* the character Phileas Fogg has to solve a lot of travel problems!

There are many differences between writing stories and writing 'for the screen'. The most important differences are:

- ▶ 'Showing' versus 'telling' the story
- ▶ Type of narrator: who is telling the story?
- ▶ Dialogue versus descriptions
- ▶ Formatting

When you write a story, you first have to decide who the narrator is – that is, who is telling the story. You can have a 'first person' narrator ('I...'), or an 'omniscient' narrator (a narrator who sees everything, and tells the story from an impersonal point of view).

When you write a film script the camera tells the story - but you can have a narrator as well. This is called a 'voice over,' or 'VO' – when you see the film, you hear someone telling you the story.

One problem you have to solve when thinking about writing a film script is how you're going to show how characters are thinking and feeling. The characters can't always say what they are thinking or feeling: when you write the script, you have to *show* this, by their actions as well as through the words they say.

This means that both actions and dialogue – what the characters say – are equally important.

Before you start your film script, think about your characters and their lives: what problems do they face, and how are they going to solve these problems?

Activity 1: Showing versus telling

1. Look at the short story you wrote after the last set of activities, or find a passage from a book you like. Have a look at the descriptions and dialogue. How could you make this into a film script?
2. Write a list of everything you can *see* in this extract. Compare the answers with a fellow student or friend.
3. Now make another list of everything you can *hear*. Again compare the answers with a fellow student or friend.

In a film, unless you have a voice over, you can't tell the viewer what is happening – you have to *show* it. Your lists of things that the viewer will see and will hear can help you to visualise the scene.

Activity 2: Narrator

Next, think about how your film will be narrated. Will it have a first person narrator, or an omniscient narrator?

Look again at the story or passage you used in Activity 1. If it has a first person 'I' narrator, rewrite it, so that there is an omniscient narrator. If it has an omniscient narrator, then take the main character, and think about how she or he would tell the story.

This activity will help you think about the different points of view you need to consider when writing a script or making a film.





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Activity 3: Dialogue

A lot of great films have great dialogue. Think about a film you love: what is it you remember? The great settings? The special effects? The story? Or some of the things the characters say to each other? It is probably all of these. But the dialogue – what the characters say to each other – can make the difference between a good film and a great film.

1. In the first worksheet 'How to create... a fictional character,' we advised you to keep a notebook, and to write down pieces of conversations in it. Now is a time when you can use this notebook. Find one of the conversations you have recorded, and think about the character or characters you have created.

Think of the setting – the place where this conversation takes place – and write the dialogue as naturally as you can.

2. If you like, look again at the story or passage you used in Activities 1 and 2. Make a note of the things the characters say to each other and what they are thinking. This will be the basis of the dialogue in your script.

In a film script, however, the way you write the descriptions and a dialogue is very different to how you write them in a story. This is called *formatting*.

Activity 4: Formatting

Remember that a film script is a guide or a list of instructions for the film director and the actors. This means that a lot of things you might write in a book would not appear in a film script. A film script is written in a very particular style. In a way it is much simpler than a novel or short story.

A script begins with a description of the setting or scene. It says simply 'EXTERIOR' or 'INTERIOR' (that is, outside, or inside) then 'Day' or 'Night.' Then there is a very brief description of where the characters are (a big room in an old house? On a crowded bus? In an empty café?)

Then there are the characters' names in the centre of the page and a brief description of them.

Simply write the characters' names (always in the centre of the page), and under them the words they say.

1. Start the beginning of your film script, including the setting of the scene, location, characters and character descriptions.
2. Look at the stories you've written so far, or choose a passage from a Macmillan Reader you like, and use the opening few paragraphs to turn into a film script.

To see examples of film scripts have a look at this page by the [BBC](#). There are some software packages (such as FinalDraft), which can help you with the formatting of a film script.

Activity 5: The 'Elevator Pitch'

Making a big budget, blockbuster movie is not an easy task! It is probably best to think small at first, and imagine your film as a short film. (Many great film-makers start by making short films.)

In Hollywood there is something called the 'Elevator Pitch'. This is when scriptwriters who need money to make their film, have to talk to producers (the people who give money to make films). Producers are known to be always busy so sometimes these meetings take place in lifts (an 'elevator' in American English). In an elevator, you only have up to one minute to say exactly what your film is about, and why it is so good. You have one minute to convince the producer to make your film!

In this activity think of an 'elevator pitch' for your film. With a friend or classmate, describe your film in no more than 60 seconds. Remember that you must include: the main character, the current situation and the conflict - 'the problem' that has to be solved as that is what drives the story.





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Activity 6: Adaptations

A lot of great films are based on books. If you are finding it difficult to write your own story, why not think about adapting a book or story into a film?

Look at the list of [Macmillan Readers](#) and see if there is anything that inspires you. The short stories of O. Henry or Philip Prowse's *L.A. Detective* books could make great films! If you adapt something, some of your film-making problems, like creating a good story with interesting characters, are solved.

Look at the 'formatting' section above, and adapt your chosen scenes and characters into a film-script format. You may need to simplify some of the descriptions, or change some of the dialogue. As a scriptwriter, you are free to do this!

Remember

- ▶ Even though you're writing, remember that film is a visual medium. Find a good balance between what you show and the dialogue.
- ▶ Make sure you know who the narrator is before you start writing
- ▶ Format your script so that it can be used as a guideline for film makers

Follow up

- ▶ Solving problems is not only important when creating a film script – it's an important life skill. As a follow-up activity, think about a situation in your life where you had to solve a problem.
- ▶ As an extra activity, think about which famous actors you would cast for your film and design the film poster!
- ▶ Keep an eye out for the next set of activities: how to write... a poem.