

# Writing a Screenplay

## *Unit 1: The Four P's of Screenplays*

So you want to write a screenplay that makes it to the big screen? The first task is to master the craft of creating cohesive plots, likeable characters, compelling action and dialogue, strong scenes and a visual 'world' that will engage your audience.

Where to begin? The screenwriter creates the characters and the story 'world' by composing scenes in a screenplay document known as the SCRIPT. This includes:

- A list of instructions for the producer, director, technical crew and cast.
- A blueprint which these artists use to construct the writer's 'world on screen.'

A good screenplay includes four main structures, which I call the Four P's.

### **1. The Protagonist**

The Protagonist refers to the lead character who is defined by four features:

- **Their physical and psychological nature** (their outer and inner worlds). E.g. where they live, work and play, what they hope for and fear most. Give them a GOAL and a FEAR.
- **Their back-story or past history** (things that occurred to them before the story begins). E.g. their childhood history, the events leading to the moment the curtain rises, the main conflicts between them and the two key support roles (antagonist, mentor, love interest, child).
- **Their immediate dramatic Problem** (the obstacle between them and their GOAL). The key dilemma that generates FEAR and helps to shape the plot in the 'here and now' of screen-time. E.g. Find the killer, stop the bomb, marry the boyfriend, replace the stolen jewels.
- **Their character 'arc' or journey** (their movement toward a GOAL). They end up in a different state from where they began. E.g. Cinderella becomes a princess, the hopeless fool becomes a wealthy leader, the frightened innocent becomes a worldly sophisticate.

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## **2. The Dramatic Problem**

The central Dramatic Problem drives the Plot by providing complications, dilemmas and obstacles for the Protagonist to deal with.

Your hero/heroine must resolve their Problem in a way that is satisfying to the audience, which is the essence of the audience's pleasure in the story. E.g. The hero stops the bomb and saves the hostages after a long struggle with the antagonist.

## **3. Plot**

Plot relates to the writer's selection and arrangement of events, action and dialogue within the timeframe of the overall story.

The writer's first priority is to create a Plot that's 'tight' and coherent. If the story is interrupted by 'gaps' and 'holes' that don't make sense, the illusion of the story is shattered and the general effect is one of audience confusion and disappointment.

The writer must have the Protagonist solve his/her dramatic Problem in a way we find believable. It must seem natural that the Protagonist chooses to pursue the bad guys or to save the innocent. The Plot must be supported by logical underpinnings.

## **4. The Premise**

The Premise is the overall concept or STATEMENT, a strong attitude or viewpoint the writer has to communicate. We need a strong emotion at the center of a story: a sense of conviction – or of anger, or of humour – which the writer imparts to the characters.

E.g. You may have something to say about the nature of love – perhaps your Premise is 'money can't buy love and the best things in life are free.'

So your hero/heroine must show this idea in action. As a way of demonstrating your Premise, you put your characters through several happy and unhappy situations which prove this central concept.

## How the four P's interlock

The four P's are interlocked in a seamless whole, providing the hidden framework or structure of the story.

The writer can never really consider the Protagonist without also considering their dramatic Problem and how this structures the Plot.

So - give your Protagonist a project or Problem that is easy to identify. E.g. Heroine must stop the bomb or the city will be destroyed and so will the love interest. We see the Protagonist move toward a clear-cut goal, to stop the bomb.

Finally, each of these structures is basically determined by the Premise, which provides the writer with a sense of the 'Big Picture' or an overall logic that guides the story. E.g. Money can't buy love...

## ACTION ACTIVITY

A JOURNAL is an excellent way to keep notes on your screenplay and add to the development of your characters, plot and ideas. It could be a binder, folder or book.

Begin by opening a file on each of these central structures. Jot down ideas and keep developing them over time. Your Plot is created by the interaction of these three threads.

- 1. Define a Premise** or concept that you would like to explore. What do you really want to write about? Human problems or behaviour, society's concerns, future challenges? E.g. Our concept that 'money can't buy love'.
- 2. Define a Protagonist** who might help you explore your Premise. E.g. A guy who wants to be a millionaire falls for a girl who heads up an important charity. Will he give away his trade secrets to help her make money for the poor?
- 3. Decide upon some Problems** the Protagonist may have which leads him or her into struggle. E.g. The guy cannot reveal his business to the girl without revealing his crooked dealings; will he change his ways and help the poor? Will he opt for love or money?