

TOP TEN TIPS FOR GETTING STARTED IN SCREENWRITING

by Craig Batty and Zara Waldeback

1) *Be inspired* – take your inspiration from life and your creative imagination, not just from other films. Good screenwriting is about making meaning from the world that we live in, and creating emotional connections between story and audience. Don't try to copy "Mamma Mia" or "The Matrix". Instead, observe people, events and environments, and find the 'story' in everyday situations.

2) *Have something to say* – think about the message you want to give to your audience through the screenplay, or the reaction you want them to have. Whether drama or comedy, there is a reason for writing this story. Every screenplay should have a central purpose – theme, meaning, feeling – so ensure you know what this is as it will guide the writing and focus your thoughts.

3) *Get to know your characters* – spend time with characters before starting the story. A good writer should know all about their characters. Let the characters lead the story; don't treat them like pawns for the plot. Allow them talk to you, to be real people. And listen to how people talk in real life to sharpen your dialogue techniques. Dialogue in first draft scripts is often overlong and lifeless, so try to develop 'an ear for dialogue'.

4) *Have a big problem* – if the characters want something but find it hard to get, you have an almost instant story. But make sure the problem is right for the theme of the story, and that it develops and grows, making things harder for the character and creating opportunities for a physical and emotional journey.

5) *Find a good world* – a familiar story set in an unfamiliar world can set readers' minds alight. A surprising world that feels suitable to genre and tone can create new story opportunities and make an impact, so explore what world might best suit a screenplay to make it come alive and feel fresh and interesting.

6) *Move the story on* – many times, new writers set up a situation then simply re-create it over and over again. A story's lifeblood is to develop, to change, to progress – this is what takes the audience on an emotional journey. Consider where characters are when they start and end, and make sure enough happens in between to propel them from one point to the other. Something has to have *changed* by the end, normally characters but if not, then the audience.

7) *Write visually* – serve the particular requirements of screenwriting by showing and not telling. Use the Four Tools Technique (verbs, objects, body language and environment) to express internal states in an external manner so meaning will be clear on screen. Analyse scenes from films to see how they work and read screenwriting books to help you develop the necessary writing skills.

8) *Work with feedback* – screenwriting is a collaborative process so learn how to receive and work constructively with feedback to improve both scripts and working relationships. Do not be disappointed with negative feedback; instead, see it as a way to move forward. Not everyone will like a script, so try to filter out negative feelings and take from it positive building blocks.

9) *Network* – always be prepared to meet potential collaborators and, where possible, attend writers' and filmmakers' events. Not only will being with like-minded people inspire you to keep writing, it could also create opportunities by making connections with producers and agents. As clichéd as it may sound, in screenwriting, who you know is definitely as important as what you know.

10) *Practice!* – nothing comes instantly, so write as much as possible and create a personal writing routine. By continual writing, you will learn, find your voice, and develop your confidence. You can talk about it and read about it and go to parties to hobnob about it, but in the end nothing beats doing it. A writer is someone who writes, not someone who goes to parties and talks about it. And don't get hung up on copyright – when it is ready, get your work out into the world, don't keep it locked away in a drawer. So no excuses – just go write!

For a range of writing exercises in all of these areas, plus much more advice on screenwriting, see "Writing for the Screen – Creative and Critical Approaches" by Craig Batty and Zara Waldeback (Palgrave, 2008)

<http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?PID=280355>