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Introduction by Ronald Harwood
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How to write

Plays & Screenplays

theguardian **TheObserver**

Veering off script

Ronald Harwood explains the two distinct approaches required to write plays and screenplays. He also believes that although there are rules, they are best ignored

The golden rule in writing for the theatre or the screen is that there is no golden rule. Rules that have been made have always been broken. Throughout history, innovation and inspired ignorance have shattered long established guidelines and directives. For nearly a thousand years it was thought that in writing plays the three classical unities decreed by Aristotle had to be strictly applied for the piece to be thought properly structured. First, the unity of action: a play must have one plot and no sub-plots. Secondly, unity of place: the events should unfold in one physical space and there should be no attempt to represent more than one place on the stage. Thirdly, unity of time: the action should take place over a 24-hour period. It is certainly true that even today if these rules are adhered to, the result can have undeniable power.

It was Shakespeare who helped to overturn Aristotle's dicta. In Henry V he proclaims a revolutionary dramatic concept. "Suppose within the girdle of these walls," the chorus urges, "Are now confin'd two mighty monarchies", thus preparing the spectators for the shift of place. Later he warns the audience that it is their thoughts that must carry the characters "here and there; jumping o'er times, / Turning the accomplishment of many years / Into an hour glass". Sub-plots abound and thus the classical unities were made redundant.

The cinema, too, has had its rules that seem to be ignored the moment they are made. For example, it used to be set down in celluloid that it was simply not possible to cut from one interior scene to another. Audiences, it was said, must know where they are and so it was thought that the exterior of a building, for example, had to be shown before seeing its interior, a formula by the way that television continues to employ. The underestimating of the intelligence of the cinema-going public has been a curse on film makers.

Writing plays and screenplays cannot be taught. All that can be given is advice which may or may not be followed. There are gurus, especially in the cinema, who have decreed rules about plot structure, character arcs and God knows what else to be used as a scheme for all screenplays but it ought to be noted that these gurus have not had many, if any, of their own screenplays turned into movies.

Yet, for the beginner certain basic tenets need be understood. It is essential to recognise the chasm between theatre and cinema. The place where you sit to watch a play is called the auditorium which literally means a place where you listen. The theatre is about language, the cinema about imagery.

Plays demand that characters talk and so articulate emotions, attitudes and ideas. Simplistic though this may sound it is nevertheless the vital component of dramatic writing. No matter how realistic, economic or poetic, it is language that must reveal thoughts and feelings or, and most difficult of all, the thoughts and feelings that are being concealed.

In writing for the cinema, language takes second place. A look between two characters in close-up can reveal much more than pages of dialogue. Location, where a scene is set, is of vital importance to atmosphere and can be a way of intensifying story and plot. The pace at which a film unfolds, that subtle, almost indefinable rhythm, should be inherent in the screenplay.

"It is essential to recognise the chasm between theatre and cinema. The theatre is about language, the cinema about imagery"

What both writing for theatre and cinema have in common, however, is that the texts must be readable. This ideal is a little easier to achieve with a play because the need for intrusive technical directions are for the most part unnecessary. By contrast, the screenplay presents agonising difficulties.

Without doubt, the screenplay is the ugliest, most ungainly document imaginable, yet it is nevertheless essential to strive for making it easily comprehensible. Because the range of those who have to read covers a vast spectrum, from financiers and producers to director, actors and technicians, the objective must be simplicity. This means keeping technical directions to a minimum or removing them altogether. Many screenplays abound with instructions: close shot, long shot, camera moves in, out, dollies, cranes up, all of them inevitably ignored. If the writer requests a close shot, you may be sure the director will shoot from a mile away. Besides which these demands are insurmountable stumbling blocks in the reading process. It ought constantly to be remembered that screenplay is not the film. It is a guide, a blueprint for telling the story in the right order and for revealing the characters.

Every writer will have his or her own method of discovery. Some make detailed notes before commencing; others, like me, use the writing process itself to unravel the secrets of character, story and plot. As I said at the beginning, there are no rules. And if there are, break them.

Ronald Harwood is an Oscar-nominated scriptwriter and playwright. His adaptation of Jean Michel Dauby's The Diving Bell and the Butterfly won a Bafta in 2007.

1. Where to begin

Starting your first script may be daunting, but taking the right approach makes it far easier, explains today's tutor Val Taylor

About your tutor

Val Taylor is a director, dramaturg, writer, development consultant for theatre, film, television and radio. She has directed the MA in Creative Writing: Scriptwriting at the University of East Anglia since 1998. She has also directed theatre productions on Broadway and in London's West End.

Scripts arise from thinking, feeling, daydreaming, remembering, reading, watching, listening, scribbling, abandoning and retrieving. Planning, writing and rewriting aren't doggedly linear; they require logical progressions, lateral, intuitive jumps and frequent retracing of steps. Script pages, if they are at all good, seem bare and incomplete until performed.

Scripts are better understood as organisms, not mechanisms; there are no rules or formulae you can follow. There are, however, observations about recurring patterns, shapes and devices in stories, and ways of thinking you can use to prompt your writing.

Ideas and stories

Your idea will come from your experience of the world and your responses to it. Keep a notebook where you can record thoughts and observations, particularly of people, behaviour and situations you encounter.

Your idea may begin via a character or place, an event or theme, or perhaps an interest in a particular genre. It's not important where you start. What you are seeking is the germ of a dramatic story: a series of actions by, and between, characters that bring about changes in their circumstances, world, lives and possibly, their natures.

Six basic questions: Where? When? Who? Why? What? How?, serve as prompts to your imagination. Throughout, they help you organise information and assess how effectively your idea is communicated.

Where? Maps the "story world".

When? Locates us within a historical moment; orders the story chronology; maps the relationship between past, present and future; sets the duration (time bracket) of the action.

Who? Introduces the nature of characters and their relationships.

What? Shapes the events that happen to your characters, the decisions they make and their subsequent actions.

Why? Uncovers character and story motivation, enabling us to try to predict what might happen next and how characters might respond.

How? Tells the story through visual images, sound, music and language.

"Script pages, if they are at all good, seem bare and incomplete until performed"

2. Setting

Locations, culture and society provide a recognisable context for your characters and story events. Whether naturalistic or fantastical, the world should operate according to a set of rules, to encourage our belief.

The world contains specific conflict arenas where the inhabitants act out their values according to the established systems.

Your story world

- Is your story world urban, rural, village or wilderness? (For example, Manchester in Life on Mars.)
- What kinds of people inhabit it? Who are the insiders or outsiders? (Gene Hunt and his squad v Sam Tyler.)
- What are their values? Beliefs? Attitudes? Customs? What unites/divides them? (Policing methods divide, the concept of justice unites them.)
- How does their material environment reflect their values, attitudes, beliefs and prejudices? (The squad room; cars; cigarettes, alcohol.)
- How do they react to and arbitrate conflicts? (Gene thumps first, asks questions later; Sam uses forensics and psychological profiling.)
- What kinds of events are likely to occur there? (Criminal activities, arrests.)
- How does the period setting affect these answers? (1973 has limited crime-detection technology and different attitudes towards physical force.)

Your plot may unfold in multiple locations. It's useful to think in terms of contrasting spaces, such as:

- Interiors v exteriors;
- Private v public spaces;
- "Expansive" v "contracted" spaces, (Manchester streets v the police room);
- "Open" v "closed" worlds, (The squad is a closed world to Sam, but open to Gene.)

Create tension between what we can see onstage/offscreen, and what we know is offstage/outside the frame. Keep us aware of the surrounding world via characters' entrances and exits; sound; and the structure of scene sequences, playing with our existing knowledge.

Write concise, vivid, descriptions of the story world. Think about colours, sounds, atmosphere: what are the key features?

"Create tension between what we can see onstage and what we know is offstage"

Ronan Bennett on how to write with a sense of place

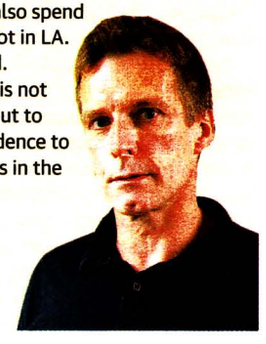
Adventures in the Screen Trade by William Goldman, the Oscar-winning writer of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Marathon Man and much more, is the only "how to" book on screenwriting I've read. Among the pearls of Goldman wisdom is his injunction to make the script "a reading experience". This is particularly important when it comes to the setting.

The setting is all about making the reader believe in the world you are trying to create. I emphasise reader because it's easy to forget that the screenplay's first audience is made up of readers — producers, script executives, development people, financiers, directors and actors.

I see a lot of scripts written in the minimalist Hollywood style. In the worst of these, stage directions are terse and make little effort to create the illusion that this world is real. For me, research is key. I want to know as much as I possibly can about the world my characters are going to inhabit.

When I was working on Public Enemies, about the bank robber John Dillinger, Michael Mann insisted that I not only visit the actual locations, but that I also spend a day driving vintage cars on a lot in LA. He didn't have to insist too hard.

The trick — not an easy one — is not to be a slave to your research, but to use it to give yourself the confidence to create vivid, compelling pictures in the reader's head.



Ronan Bennett's screenplays include Rebel Heart and Hamburg Cell

3. Character

In naturalistic dramatic characters, we look for underlying motivations that provoke decisions and courses of action. To uncover these, we examine characters' outer and inner lives.

Outer life

A character's "outer life" is bound up with social roles and relationships: for example, parent/ child/ sibling; friend/ partner/ spouse; employer/ employee. Complex story worlds create a spectrum of social roles: for example, legal systems offer clusters – law-makers, law-breakers, "thief-takers" and victims, the basis for crime or revenge thrillers, heists and capers, murder mysteries and television police or detective series.

Written or unwritten rules, expectations and taboos govern roles and relationships, prescribing (or challenging) public and private behaviour, and attributing high or low social status. Roles, relationships and status locate characters within their world, stipulating their everyday interactions. The story events cut across the everyday, generating conflicts within and between characters and situations.

For each character, consider:

- Sex and gender; race; ethnic origin; age; sexual orientation;.
- Class; education; employment; financial circumstances; religion; political affiliation;.
- Family and kinship groups; circles of friendship and affinity;
- Where on the high or low status axis would each of these categories place him?

Inner life

The "inner life" embraces his psychology (or pathology), emotional condition, and moral impulses. His outer life is his public face; the inner life, his private face. Effective characters experience harmony and conflict between outer and inner, public and private lives. This tension provides the source of his dilemma: the choice between courses of action leading to loss, gain and compromise.

Explore a character's internal "drives": desire, fear, need, and will. Ask:

- What does he want? Why? How badly? How strong is his will to acquire or achieve this?
- How far will he go in order to do this? What's stopping him?
- What does he fear? How badly? Why? How strong is his will to avoid this?
- How far will he go to avoid this? What's stopping him?
- What does he need? Why? How badly?
- How far will he go? And what, if anything, is stopping him?
- Does he know he needs this? If not, why? And what has to happen to make him recognise it?

Create points of conflict between his desires, needs and fears: for example, to get what he needs, he'll have to face his worst fear; what he wants is the opposite of what he really needs. When need amplifies fear or desire, it raises the stakes.

"Effective characters experience harmony and conflict between outer and inner, public and private lives"

A character lives in the present, but his past – his "backstory" – may dictate his emotional terrain and influence his actions. Strengths and weaknesses often lie there, providing 'ghosts' (people, events) to haunt his present life. Root his present dilemma in the secrets, illusions or self-deceptions in his backstory.

Characterisation

Characters' outer and inner lives are revealed through:

- Physical type, body language and gesture: give each character a "tell" – a definitive, revealing gesture or movement.
- Costume and hair.
- Settings, particularly private spaces: think about how the objects, colours, sounds and textures reflect the character.
- Dialogue: how the character speaks, and what he speaks about.
- Actions: the decisions the character makes and carries out.

Pixar's film WALL.E is an excellent case study in character creation and characterisation: the central characters are anthropomorphised machines. Though their dialogue is mostly squeaks, beeps and chirps, the communication is clear, and thoroughly rooted in character.

Character functions

The protagonist is the character who makes the most active decisions. The dramatic story tracks his progress, and may follow his point of view. He's not necessarily pleasant or good, but he is the character in whom we are invited to invest. Each character should have their own story, but the protagonist's should be the strongest.

The next strongest story belongs to the antagonist, generating conflict by disrupting and blocking the protagonist's progress. She is the force for change within the story. She must be capable of defeating – even destroying – him; if she's under-developed, the story collapses. Build her outer and inner life, and backstory. Use their desires, fears and needs to set them in irreconcilable opposition.

The protagonist may be a single character, a pair (love stories), or a group (for example, This Life). The antagonist may be any of the following:

- A character
- An opposing force, such as societal attitudes or changes
- Nature (the Asian tsunami, The Birds)
- Supernatural forces, or aliens
- Technology (HAL 9000 in 2001: A Space Odyssey)
- The protagonist can also be his own antagonist (Tom Ripley in The Talented Mr Ripley).

These characters require allies and opponents to flesh out the main story. These secondary characters can change sides or allegiances to help you create obstacles, setbacks and triumphs for your principals.

4. Story events

Dramatic stories build sequences of occurrences and actions: things that happen (such as monsoon rain; flat tyre) and things that are done (such as sending messages; firing guns). Audiences' primary interest lies in characters' decisions and the ensuing consequences.

Story events rooted in human agency offer shape to scenes and sequences via familiar, culturally-specific behaviour patterns, routines and rituals. The skeleton shape may be confirmed through "proper performance" or disrupted by culture-clashes, misinterpretation and/or transgressive behaviour.

Working with event-types

What kinds of events are your characters likely to create within the story world? Does the genre imply particular events? What will audiences expect to see? Look for natural opposites, clusters and implied sequences between events. The indicative list (below) suggests a few:

- Ceremony
- Celebration
- Reunion
- Meal
- Chase or pursuit
- Recruitment
- Seduction
- Interview or interrogation
- Investigation
- Game, competition or contest
- Test, trial or ordeal
- Deception
- Discovery or revelation
- Holiday
- Voyage or quest
- Arrival or departure (including birth v and death), meeting or parting
- Argument or reconciliation
- Battle or negotiation.

Some event-types can frame the overall story. Combinations provide opportunities for conflict: Festen, for example, uses a family reunion to detonate explosive revelations around the table at a birthday celebration dinner.

Consider where each event belongs: its placing governs the unfolding of your theme. When you've found the story's climactic event, try reversing its position: what happens if it's the opening event, as in Harold Pinter's Betrayal?

"Once you've found the story's climatic event, try reversing its position"

Sequencing

Break down the event-type into sequences of incremental action. For example: Peace > Disagreement > Quarrel > Skirmish > Battle > War > Truce > Peace.

Here, the unvarying escalation becomes monotonous. Introduce reversals to create changes of direction: Peace > Disagreement > Quarrel > Reconciliation > Peace > Quarrel > Skirmish > Stand-off > Negotiation > Ceasefire > Skirmish > War > Truce > Peace.

The escalation breaks and reverses after the first quarrel, then renews. It reverses again when the skirmish reaches a stand-off and negotiation intervenes. The final reversal breaks the ceasefire, setting up the climactic escalation (war), ultimately resolved by truce and restoration of peace.

Understanding event sequences permits sophisticated plotting, where continuities of time and place can be fractured without losing the thread of the story, as in Memento, 21 Grams, or Michael Frayn's play Copenhagen.

5. Theme

Themes carry the emotional dimension, where we recognise a truthful observation about ourselves that transcends sentimentality, triteness or banality.

The principal theme governs the protagonist's decisions. He's unaware, until the final sequence, because the theme's truthful observation concerns him. Discernible in the degree of change he's undergone, the theme becomes clear in the story ending.

Life on Mars had excellent features:

- Intriguing premise (modern-day policeman wakes up after an accident to find he's gone back in time to 1973).
- Engaging characters, led by Sam Tyler and Gene Hunt.
- Familiar police genre, with a sci-fi twist.
- Strong central conflict between Sam's and Gene's attitudes.
- Good "hook": is Sam Tyler in a coma? Dreaming? Has he time-travelled? How can he get home?
- Strong goal: To get home, Sam first has to discover how and why he's been sent back in 1973.

To understand Life on Mars' theme, look at the climax of season two. Throughout, Sam has unwittingly been acquiring pieces of the puzzle about his identity. When the last piece crystallises his internal need, his final choice – to be where he belongs – delivers a strong emotional charge.

Working with theme

Theme emerges as you write and rewrite; it won't be fully formed as you begin. It's the most personal part of your writing.

- Why does your story attract you? Why do you care?
- Your themes will respond to fears and needs; the desire for companionship, love or the society of peers. Express your early ideas as questions: ask "what does X have to overcome if she is to be redeemed?" Or "what is preventing X from achieving redemption?"
- Use what you believe to be true about human behaviour and its motivations. Draw upon your own experience.
- Avoid judging your characters. David Simon (creator of The Wire) insists that characters' humanity should be explored, without moralising: "It's about making everybody whole."

"Theme is the most personal part of your writing. Why does your story attract you? Why do you care?"

6. Stakes

The stakes create jeopardy to motivate your characters. Don't over-pitch them at the outset; you need to escalate throughout ("rising action") without falling into repetitive, wearying, melodramatic action. Be wary, though, of under-pitching: insufficient risk means audiences won't invest in the characters.

Consider:
- What is at risk of loss or destruction? (At the extreme, death, or the end of the world.)
- Why? What is the threat? (Define the antagonist.)
- How severe is the risk? (Likelihood of occurrence increases audiences' engagement)
- When would the risk become irretrievable?
- What has to be done to avert it?
- What will it cost?
- What could be gained through confronting and overcoming it?
- Is passivity (or giving up) acceptable, or better? (These four questions frame the protagonist's dilemma.)

Think about this in the story as a whole, then give yourself room to escalate; determine how little needs to happen to trigger the risk at the outset (the "inciting incident"). Use the questions to help plot the steps of rising action from scene to scene.

From "lack" to "gain"

These questions help to shape an event-driven story with cause and effect sequences (thrillers and mysteries, for example.) If you prefer character-driven stories, the stakes relate more to the characters' wellbeing and emotional condition. The questions can be rephrased:
- What does your protagonist lack, at the outset: for example, love, social status, economic stability, freedom?
- Why? (Explore her backstory and the story world.)
- What does she need to acquire to convert lack into gain: for example, knowledge, money, friends?
- What is stopping her? (Explore contradictions within your protagonist, and external circumstances.)
- What is at risk if she doesn't succeed? (Make the audience root for her.)
- What will it cost her? Why is it worth paying? (These two questions frame the protagonist's dilemma.)

Lack and gain can be ambiguous: for example, we regret loss of innocence; acquiring knowledge or experience is painful. Exploit such ambiguities in character-driven stories, such as romances, rites of passage.

"Be wary of under-pitching: insufficent risk means the audience won't invest in the characters"

Frank Cottrell Boyce on set up and pay off

If you're making a generic film, you generally know what the ending is going to be: the crime will be solved, the lovers will kiss, the sequel will be suggested. But if you're writing away from the formula it's a lot harder to set up the ending. If you can come up with something in the last few minutes that makes the audience see the whole film in a new light, you're onto a winner.

In Sideways, Paul Giamatti's character carts his massive, unreadable novel around everywhere with him. It's a great running gag and a brilliant way of explaining what a loser he is. The ending of the film is that one person does read it. Just one. But the right one. It's very hard to set up something like that book without telegraphing it too obviously. The secret is not to try to write it in advance. Wait until you get to the end, then look back at what seems resonant or worth revisiting and chose that.

Another great example is the ending of Cinema Paradiso. Early in the film, the projectionist has the job of cutting out the steamy kisses from various movies. At the end, our grown-up, now cynical hero receives a reel of film. This turns out to be all the lost kisses. I don't even like the film, but that ending always pulverises me. It sends you back to the heart of the film, picks up what seemed like a throwaway joke and makes it into something that forces you to feel keenly the sense of loss that comes with growing up.

Frank Cottrell Boyce's screenplays include 24 Hour Party People and A Cock and Bull Story

7. Genre

Genres are categories of stories grouped according to shared, characteristic patterns of form, content and/or style. This grouping provides shorthand means of conveying to your audiences what kind of intellectual, emotional and physical experience to expect.

You may not want to write within genres; however, it's useful to understand how they function so that you can work within, across or outside them. Film and television employ genres extensively; commissioning discussions require you to be conversant with their functions. Theatre and radio employ genres more loosely, but a proper understanding remains valuable.

The UK Film Council reports that, in 2007, the most popular genres with UK cinema audiences were:

- Fantasy
- Comedy
- Thriller
- Drama
- Horror
- Crime
- Science fiction
- Romance
- War
- Action
- Adventure.

Television employs story genres within series formats. Current schedules are anchored by "precinct dramas": groups or teams working within a tight-knit group of locations, often a workplace. Police and medical series are obvious examples: the station, laboratory, hospital or surgery provides the central location.

Mainstream UK theatre is dominated by musicals and comedy; subsidised or non-mainstream theatre draws on relationships, personal stories, social drama, and romance; radio does too.

Working with genre

Research the genre you're interested in: look at how key elements are used. I'll use horror as a model, with Alien, a horror/sci-fi hybrid, as an example:

- Story world: Are there characteristic locations? What are the rules of the story world? Horror uses places where the protagonist expects to feel safe or knows what the dangers are; they become traps once the antagonist appears. (The Nostromo spaceship.)
- Stakes: What is usually at risk? How are the stakes habitually raised? Is there a "ticking clock" timeline? Horror places the protagonist in mortal danger, closing off her escape routes as the antagonist draws near. (The Nostromo crew have to prevent the spaceship reaching Earth with the alien on board; Ripley barely escapes.)
- Protagonist and antagonist: What are the generic characteristics of the protagonist and antagonist? How is the audience aligned with them? The horror protagonist is a victim who must find extraordinary personal reserves to save herself. Our point of view is aligned with her; we share her terror. Horror antagonists are (literally or figuratively) monsters: superior in strength, malevolent in intent. (Ellen Ripley must turn implacable warrior to defeat the alien's speed and cunning.)
- "Trigger" and resolution: What are the events that trigger stories in this genre? How are they resolved? Horror triggers bring in the monster, sparking the protagonist's jeopardy. The resolution expects the monster to be destroyed or expelled and the protagonist to escape. (Alien's trigger occurs when the crew members examine the alien eggs. It resolves when Ripley finally ejects the creature from the escape pod.)
- The "expected scenes": What scenes would audiences expect to see? Horror establishes the protagonist's normal world before admitting the monster. There is a series of attacks which the protagonist at first tries to avoid, before being forced into a climactic battle: whether or not she wins is the writer's choice. (Alien begins with the routine schedule on the Nostromo, disrupted by the discovery of the alien eggs. The first attack takes place on the planet; the injured crewman unwittingly brings the alien onboard and it kills the crew. Ripley thinks she's escaped, but finding that the alien has hidden in her escape pod, she has to fight again.)
- Style: Does the genre employ characteristic visual and aural stylistic devices? Horror's usual tone is one of threat and unease, created by a close alignment with the protagonist's point of view. Strong contrasts of light and shadow conceal rather than reveal information. Periods of calm alternate with bursts of frantic action which grow longer as the action approaches its climax.

Familiarise yourself with the patterns of genre; use your notes to refine your decisions about the story world, characters, events, theme and stakes of your story.

"Horror uses places where the protagonist expects to be safe, they become traps once the antagonist appears"

8. Structure

Script structure creates a strong narrative framework that delivers your theme through the interaction of the story world, characters and events. It shapes audiences' experience of your story. Poor structure – or lack of a discernible structure – is the commonest weakness in scripts.

Three-act structure/Hero's journey/ 7 & 22 steps

Mainstream western cinema and television are dominated by three-act structure. This is a conflict-driven model, aligning audiences with the point of view of a protagonist who makes decisions and takes action to resolve a series of crises. Sequences are constructed in chains of cause and effect, progressively raising the stakes. Structural models such as the hero's journey (Christopher Vogler, following Joseph Campbell), and the 7 & 22 steps (John Truby) follow similar causal, goal-directed, conflict-based pathways.

Alternative models

The western independent sector and many national cinemas prefer more open structural models. These models use contrasting features: multiple protagonists and multiple plots; passive or powerless protagonists; no point of view alignment with the protagonist; narration; events linked by coincidence (such as time or location); an order of events that can be rearranged; ending, instead of resolution; the structure prevents audiences from empathy with characters. Examples of films using these kinds of structures would be Dogville, Intacto, and Magnolia.

Plays frequently choose less plot-driven alternatives, exploiting non-naturalistic devices and theatrical possibilities. Structures can be circular (Waiting for Godot); episodic (Top Girls); employ parallel action, echoes and associational links. Tom Stoppard (Arcadia, Rock 'n' Roll), Michael Frayn (Copenhagen, Democracy) and Caryl Churchill (Far Away; Heart's Desire)all use open structures.

Working with structure

Look at your theme, characters and story.
- Is your theme best delivered through a single, goal-driven protagonist whose decisions and actions create change within himself and his world? (A)
- Does your theme address the effects of the story world upon one or more protagonists, whose actions cannot effect change internally or externally? (B)
- Should we be closely aligned with the protagonist's viewpoint? (A)
- Should we reflect on the characters' situations and actions, but not identify with them? (B)

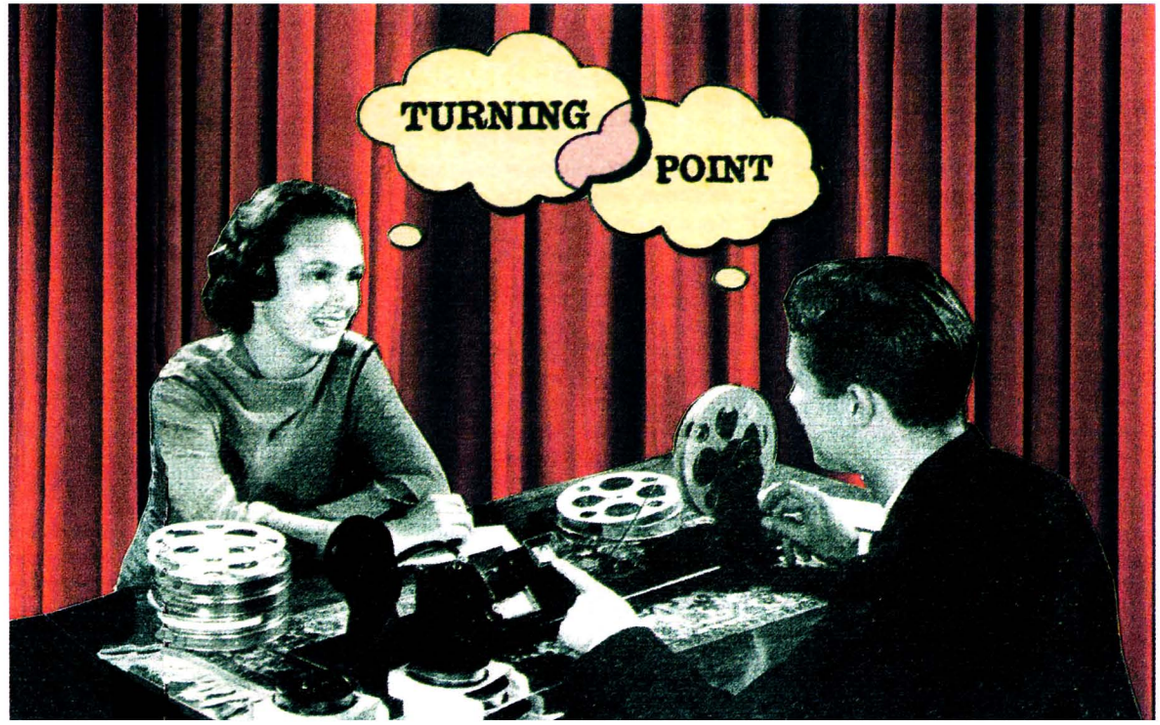
Look at your story events in relation to your theme, characters and story world:
- Can you identify an event that would trigger a chain of cause and effect? An event that would finally resolve the chain? (A)
- Would these events, arranged into causal chains, support a main plot driven by the protagonist's decisions? (A)
- Are these events driven primarily by characters' decisions? (A)
- Are your events linked by time, location, characters or theme, not by cause and effect? (B)
- Would these events support multiple, smaller plots of equal importance? (B)
- Are these events driven primarily by factors outside characters' control? (B)

Mostly (A) answers could suggest using three- act structure, or the hero's journey, or the 7 & 22 steps. Mostly (B) answers could suggest alternative models.

Plotting

Structure organises the strategic release of narrative information. Many decisions will concern questions of knowledge:
- What does the audience) already know?
- What does each character already know?
- To whom is each piece of information revealed? (Irony occurs when we know more than the characters.)
- How and when is it revealed?

Causal plots (A) are structured around obstacles, turning points and reversals. The trigger provokes the protagonist to formulate a goal, and to take steps to achieve it. Each step confronts him with a new obstacle to overcome. Each decision generates a turning point that takes the story in a new direction. Some turning points help him progress; others produce setbacks and reversals.



"Poor structure – or lack of discernable structure – is the commonest weakness in scripts"

In three-act structure, each act pivots around a major turning point: act one's turning point comes from external events;. act two's turning point comes from an internal shift inside the protagonist; act three's turning point comes from the protagonist's final decisive action, and brings about the resolution.

Construct your scenes and sequences using this pattern: establish a situation, then disrupt it. Use turning points and reversals to provoke actions and reactions.

Alternative (B) structures still require conflict, obstacles, turning points and reversals. The protagonist still makes decisions, but plot progression is driven externally. There may not be plot progression; the story describes the world and the characters, rather than engaging them in action. In (B) structures, turning points move us between parallel stories, or loop us backwards and forwards between episodes in the story. In both (A) and (B) structures, try to build in echoes: images, sounds or lines that recur in different contexts; information that recurs in different ways. This process of foreshadowing operates as a form of prediction in (A) structures; in (B) structures, it binds together different threads of story, and carries your theme.

Exercise: building a structure

Make at least four selections from each of the following lists of locations, characters and events, and work out the structure of a five-minute story.

Exterior: front doorstep; traffic intersection; garden.
Interior: bus; kitchen; department store display window.
Characters: cleaner; bus passenger; shop assistant; grandparent; school student; window-shopper.
Events: a text message is sent or received; a photograph is taken; a wallet is lost; a breakage occurs; a slap; a kiss.

9. Dialogue

Dialogue fulfils several key functions:

- Characterisation: Give everyone distinctive speech patterns, habits, vocabulary.
- Communication between characters: What they say, when, how and to whom, to propel the plot forward.
- Exposition: Key information should be shown, if possible, not spoken. Don't let characters tell each other what they already know.
- Description: Narration can create atmosphere, bring a detail into focus, or convey the speaker's response to unseen events.
- Commentary: Contextual perspective on character or story developments can be given. Contemporary drama sometimes uses a narrator.

Writing dialogue

A character speaks for reasons arising from her nature, circumstances, inner life or goals. Why she is speaking? Is she seeking information, issuing an invitation, arguing, for example? Think about what she says versus what she means: could this be deception, evasion, intimacy or ignorance? When you're clear about the underlying intention, ensure the lines deliver it.

Silence is an eloquent component of dialogue, shaping speech rhythms. Silence points to emotional subtext, in conjunction with the character's gestures or body language, which may confirm, amplify or contradict what she is saying.

Use dialogue economically and strategically. Plays employ more dialogue than screenplays, but you need less than you think. Characters should be succinct, though not necessarily direct: evasion, waffle or hedging may be appropriate. Save longer speeches for a genuine payoff: a revelation, or pivot point.

If your style is non-naturalistic, stylised speech may be appropriate, relying more on rhythm or metre, sentence structure, and imagery. The need for precision, economy and clarity is even greater, in this instance.

All dialogue needs to be read aloud to hear how it sounds, and recognise how much can be cut.

"All dialogue needs to be read aloud to hear how it sounds, and recognise how much can be cut"

Lucinda Coxon on how to write dialogue

Dialogue is the words characters speak to themselves, one another and an audience. And before that, of course, to the writer. When characters speak to the writer with tremendous urgency, that urgency translates into dialogue with real tension and immediacy.

Dialogue is also, of course, the words the characters do not speak. What is not said is always telling.

Audiences tend to assume that characters in plays and films are telling the truth. They trust them. It's imperative that the writer returns this compliment by trusting the characters also – even if they're pathological liars. Often you can hear the moments in the dialogue where the writer feels that they have a more important thing to say than the characters. This is rarely a good sign.

While dialogue can be informational, a way to develop character or reveal plot, it is emphatically not conversational, any more than war or sex or prayer is conversational. Dialogue is character, is plot. Above all, it is action.

The best exercise for writing dialogue is reading other people's. Read widely and read people who don't write like anyone else: Howard Barker, Caryl Churchill, Gregory Motton, Marguerite Duras. Read them (and your own work) aloud.

When the characters began to speak, the writer was really listening.

Lucinda Coxon's latest play, Happy Now?, premiered at the National Theatre in January

10. Visual storytelling

Pixar's WALL.E begins with a skewed, futuristic city panorama: skyscrapers made from compacted rubbish, everywhere deserted. Closer in, a squat little robot busily collects and squashes rubbish for the next "trash tower". The robot is rusty, battered, but perky and inquisitive, sorting items for his collection. A stencilled acronym reveals his name: Wall.E. The story world, the protagonist and a major theme are introduced with visual style, charm and wit: no dialogue.

Llewelyn Moss hunts in baking Texas prairie in No Country for Old Men. He finds the aftermath of a shootout: bloody corpses, SUVs, guns. One man, dying, begs for water; Moss ignores him. He follows a blood trail, finds another corpse and a case full of dollar bills. Joel and Ethan Coen introduce the protagonist, story world and launch the plot through gripping images.

Sound plays a key role: dry desert rustling, rifle-shots, boots crunching, truck doors slamming, underscore the opening of No Country... As Wall.E works, he beeps and hums a tune from Hello Dolly! learned from a treasured videotape. Visual storytelling benefits from a well-chosen soundscape, which can include music and song, where appropriate.

Writing visually

- Images and dialogue should complement or contradict, without duplication. Juxtapose images within scenes and across sequences to create additional layers of meaning: for example, contrasting English and African locations, official buildings v villages; Tessa's bare skin and flamboyant clothing v the men's suits (The Constant Gardener).
- Screen images narrate, dialogue supports. Voiceover narration should establish an intimate, exclusive relationship with the audience (American Beauty), rather than give expositional information: use it for character purposes, not as a plotting shortcut.
- Give information visually, via (for example) labels, captions, advertising billboards, newspaper headlines, street and shop names.
- Clarify the scene's event-type: familiar events, such as meals, arrivals and departures, supply an existing, accessible visual grammar.
- In screenplays, visual montages can avoid repetition, compress time and reveal character: see Wall.E's faithful protection of Eve as she awaits her recall to the spaceship Axiom.
- Gestures, movements and expressions provide characterisation and plot information. Psychological gestures can reveal emotional truths, secrets, or subtext: consider how Chigurh's life-or-death coin-tosses reveal his psychopathic nature (No Country ...).
- Where dialogue slows the tempo unnecessarily, cut it: make sure the transitions from image to image generate pace and rhythm.

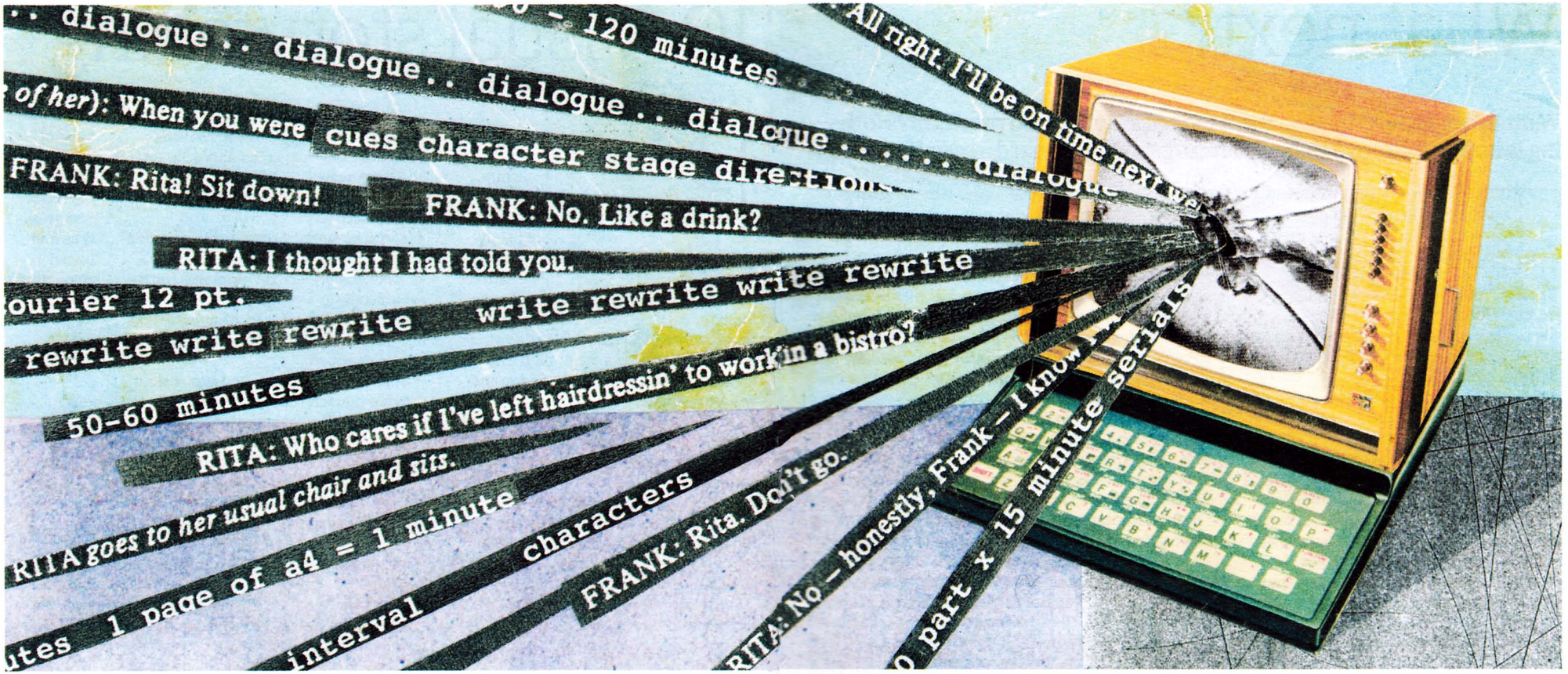
Stage plays require visual writing: we are looking as well as listening. Locations are fewer: make them work harder – exploit the tension between onstage/offstage. Psychological gestures are particularly valuable in naturalistic plays: in The Seafarer, alcoholic Sharky refuses to join in the heroic drinking bouts, until he believes his soul is forfeit to the sinister Lockhart. Then he fatalistically downs glass after glass of poteen.

Stage images carry significant metaphoric weight (Max's armchair, placed dead centre in The Homecoming), and hint at plot or character revelations (the burn scars on Mag's arm and the chip pan on the cooker in The Beauty Queen of Leenane).

"Visual montages can avoid repetition, compress time and reveal character"

Exercise: create a scene

Write a three-minute visual scene or sequence based around a ceremony (wedding or funeral; launching a ship; official 'robing' or investiture; parade) in which the protagonist is involved. Sound, including music and song can be used, but no more than 10 words of dialogue.



11. Layout and formats

Script formatting is highly conventionalised, so you need to acquaint yourself with the correct format; this will differ for theatre, cinema, television or radio.

Published scripts don't always reflect the required conventions; many are reformatted for publication.

Internet sites offer downloadable original screenplay drafts: some are free, others for purchase. Good sites include: screenwriterstore.co.uk; script-o-rama.com; iscriptdb.com (a search resource for locating free screenplay downloads.) The BBC Writersroom (bbc.co.uk/writersroom) supplies radio scripts and television episodes. Stage plays aren't online, but published scripts often retain original formatting conventions.

Scriptwriting software packages (for PCs and Macs) can be very expensive but, particularly for screenplays, are a better option than trying to construct your own formatting templates. Final Draft is widely used within the screen industries.

There are also free software packages: Celtx (celtx.com) has good online support. The BBC Writersroom offers ScriptSmart, for screenplays, but there is no online support. The website also has sample formats for theatre, film, radio and studio-based television, for reference.

Formatting conventions stipulate layout, including spacing: Courier New is a standard font; use font size 12. The conventions allow for approximate conversion of pages to performance running time: one page of A4 script, properly formatted, converts to approximately one minute, across a full-length script. They also allow the reader to distinguish quickly between character cues, dialogue and stage/ scene directions.

"Your script will go through several drafts; much of your task will be rewriting and editing"

The average feature film running time is 90-120 minutes. Television formats dictate running time: 30-minute episodes are usually the minimum, with many drama series using episode lengths of 50-60 minutes. Radio scripts also work in format lengths: 45-minute and 60-minute single plays; 10-part x 15-minute serials; two-part x 60-minute classic adaptations. Stage plays vary widely, anywhere between 75 (without an interval) to 120 minutes (including interval).

In your script, focus on the story and characters. Keep description to a minimum, and avoid trying to direct the actors and the camera. In stage/ scene directions, avoid "purple" vocabulary, but do ensure that you paint the picture vividly. Your script will go through several drafts; much of your task will be rewriting and editing, so it's OK to overwrite the first draft, to some extent. Remember: it's easier to cut than to add, without the script seeming "patched".

What next?

Want to get your script into the hands of a Hollywood producer? Nothing is impossible, says Debra Hayward, as long as you do your homework

There are no easy options when presenting yourself or your screenplay for the first time, but your first objective is to ensure that it is read by as many influential people as possible. There are a number of avenues you can pursue simultaneously, but before getting your screenplay out there, make sure you do your homework.

If you have written a comedy for instance, identify producers who specialise or have had success in this genre. If you're not sure, don't be afraid to call up and ask what sort of material they are looking for. Research and enter screenwriting competitions and schemes (there are many reputable ones) for which your screenplay might be suitable. Shortlisted screenplays on these types of initiatives often get into circulation and are read by producers and executives in film and TV companies.

Network – attend seminars, forums and festivals about screenwriting. Meeting people at these kinds of events offer up opportunities to get your work noticed, or at the very least provide useful advice.

Read the trade press. Keeping up to date with what's going on in the industry generally might help you identify gaps in the market or potential buyers.

Get yourself and agent. Most producers here, or in US won't accept unsolicited material, so it helps to have an agent who can get your screenplay read by decision-makers. They will also help you be realistic about whether your screenplay will sell or should be considered as a "writing sample" for possible future commissions.

Getting one can be tough, so be persistent. Identify one who shares your sensibilities and can help you grow as writer – a good relationship with your agent can be the bedrock of a successful writing career.

When sending out your screenplay, don't underestimate the importance of the presentation. Don't use gimmicks. Professional screenwriters don't use coloured pages, fancy fonts, ring binders, illustrations or any visual aids. No amount of customising will improve your submission; in fact it usually has the opposite effect. The people reading your screenplay read hundreds and you need to make the reading experience as painless as possible. Invest in a screenwriting programme such as final draft, use Courier New font in 12 point and let the writing speak for itself.

Finally, be realistic about the challenges you face in getting your work produced and even read by the right people. While you wait for responses, don't stop writing. Get on with the next outline or screenplay, build up your bank of ideas for the future.

"Most producers won't accept unsolicited material, so it helps to have an agent"

Debra Hayward is an executive producer at Working Title Films

West End theatres receive thousands of scripts a year. The Royal Court's Dominic Cooke explains how to make sure your play gets read

There are several guidelines worth following before you submit your play to a theatre. The crucial starting point is to Find out as much information as possible about a theatre, whether it produces new plays and, if they do, what processes they use for reading unsolicited scripts. Also, be clear on how the theatre in question likes to receive scripts and who exactly you should write to. In the larger theatres it is likely to be the literary manager. Theatre literary offices are very busy places - at the Royal Court we receive up to 3,000 scripts a year – so make it as easy as possible for the theatre to read your work by following their guidelines for submission meticulously.

Make sure that what you are submitting is a stage play. This may sound ridiculous but at the Royal Court we frequently receive film scripts or tarted-up TV ideas. If it is a film script and you fancy seeing it on stage, you need to reconceive it for the stage and rewrite it accordingly before sending it in.

Ensure that the play is a complete as possible before sending. It's not a good idea to submit a first draft that hasn't been read by anyone but you. Ask appropriate friends or family to give feedback. You'll only have one shot with each script, so it's really worth submitting the work at its best. Remember that a theatre is not a reading service. If it receives unsolicited scripts it will be serious about evaluating the script in terms of its suitability for production, but is under no obligation to give detailed feedback. There are reading services such as The Writer's Room who will give you that kind of advice.

Crucially, acquaint yourself with the theatre's taste and previous programming. There's no point submitting, for example, an absurdist slasher monologue to a producer of West End musicals. Also, avoid bombarding every theatre in the country. If the play is accepted by more than one theatre at the same time, you'll annoy at least one of the potential producers.

Another route you might want to go down is that of finding an agent. Most produced writers have agents, although often agents don't pick up writers until after they've been accepted for production. There's no denying, however, that a play submitted by a reputable agent will be read more quickly by a theatre than a play coming from an unknown source. And the agent will be an invaluable source of advice on the suitability of a given theatre for your play. Again, it's important to do your homework. Find out who represents the playwrights you admire, or whose work is close to yours in feel. You can do this by checking the front of the writer's published playtexts. There will be an agents name and address under the heading "Application for Performance by Professionals".

Finally, if you face rejection, to take "no" for an answer and move on. If a theatre or agent passes, maybe the relationship is not for you anyway. Remember that most leading playwrights had early plays rejected.

"You'll only have one shot with each script, so it's really worth submitting the work at its best"

Dominic Cooke is the associate director of the Royal Court Theatre