WRITING A SCREENPLAY
How to turn out a script

Lesson Plan:
Writing a screenplay

Overview

This series of lessons was designed to meet the needs of gifted children for extension beyond the standard curriculum with the greatest ease of use for the educator. The lessons may be given to the students for individual self-guided work, or they may be taught in a classroom or a home-school setting. This particular lesson plan is primarily effective in a classroom setting. Assessment stragevies and rubrics are included. The lessons were developed by Lisa Van Gemert, M.Ed.T., the Mensa Foundation's Gifted Children Specialist.

Introduction

Strong readers make the "movie" of a book in their minds. This lesson guides children through the fundamentals of format required to write an actual movie screenplay.

Guiding Questions

● What are the key features of a screenplay?
● How can a screenwriter correctly write a screenplay that can be read by actors, directors, and producers?

Learning Objectives

After following these lessons, students will be able to:

● Define screenwriting terminology, such as "high concept," "dialogue" and "parenthetical."
● Evaluate a story for its storytelling potential.
● Create a movie's "high concept."
● Correctly format a screenplay.
● Effectively use screenwriting techniques to guide dialogue and action.

Preparation

This lesson requires a computer and a word processing program. No other preparation or resources are required.

Lesson 1: Prologue

If you like to read and you like to watch movies, you've probably thought that you could write a movie yourself. Have you? Be honest! In this lesson, you'll learn the very basics of screenwriting in a nutshell. There is much more to learn, obviously, but this will get you pointed in the right direction.

Before you go any further, the first thing you need to do is look at a real screenplay to get an idea of what they look like. Here are a few examples:

- Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (goo.gl/qe8hbg)
- *The African Queen*, by James Agee, John Huston, and Peter Viertel (goo.gl/tDYTmC)
- *Who Shot Roger Rabbit?*, by Jeffrey Price and Peter S. Seaman (goo.gl/VLcKMH)
- *The Lion King*, by Irene Mecchi and Jonathan Roberts (goo.gl/b985Ke)

Did you notice how the formatting didn't read like a book? Screenplays are written using a specific format. People who write screenplays professionally use specific software, and if you become serious about it, you can invest in that, too. Some commonly used screenwriting software products include:

- Literature & Latte's Scrivener (goo.gl/RV4N3Y) [paid]
- Final Draft (goo.gl/pMRngY) [paid]
- Writer Duet (goo.gl/vBxt6d) [free]

Professional screenwriting software is pretty expensive, but you don't need it to start writing. All you need is the know-how and a story to tell. Ready?

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Lesson 2: Action! (steps 1-4)

STEP 1: The story – First, you need to choose your story. It can be a long chapter book or a shorter picture book you love. It can be a comic strip you like to read. It can be a story you made up. A good story will have strong characters and make you feel something for what's going on. What story are you going to use?

_____

_____

_____

_____

STEP 2: The concept – Next, describe your story's "high concept." This is the term they use in Hollywood to mean what the main idea of your story is. Put it in a "what if" format. For instance, think about the movie *Mary Poppins*. The "what if" statement would be "What if a nanny with magical powers came to take care of three children and changed their lives forever?" Write your "what if" statement here:

_____

_____

_____

_____

STEP 3: The document – Now let's make a title page. Open a document.

● Find the middle of the page, vertically and horizontally. Type the title in bold type.
● Two lines below the title, type "Written by" centered on the line.
● Two lines underneath that, type your name, also centered.
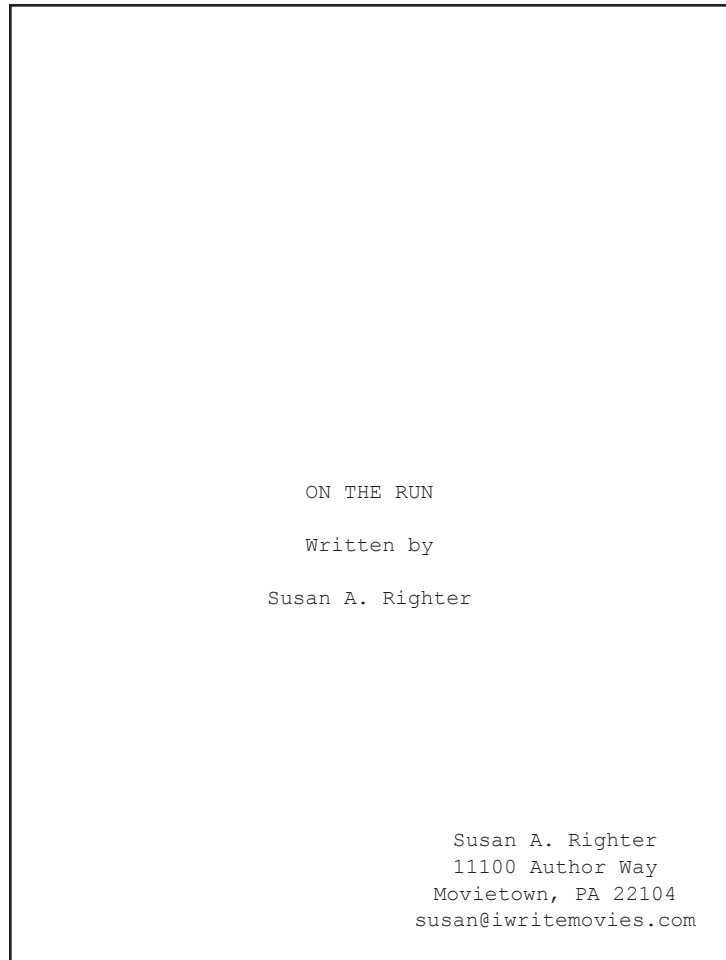● In the lower right-hand corner, put your name, address, phone number and email address.

(Example at right.)

STEP 4: The document format – Now you're ready to start your story. Before you begin, you have to format the page.

This is important to do correctly if you want to be taken seriously. However, there are many standards out there for the "right" way to format a script, usually dependent on who the script will be submitted to. For our purposes here, we're going to aim high and use the standards used for the Academy Awards.

Here's what you do:

```
                    ON THE RUN

                    Written by

                 Susan A. Righter




                              Susan A. Righter
                              11100 Author Way
                              Movietown, PA 22104
                            susan@iwritemovies.com
```

● Insert a page number in the upper right corner of the header. Make it so that the page number starts on the second page with "2." You don't put a page number on the first page.
● Use the font Courier in 12-point.
● Set the margins as follows:
   ▶ Top and bottom: 1"
   ▶ Left margin: 1.5" (you have to leave extra on the left to allow for the hole punching)
   ▶ Right margin: 1"

Lesson 3: Writing a scene (steps 5-11)

STEP 5: Setting the scene – Now that you've got your document formatted, you're ready to write. You will write in scenes. Scenes are pieces of the whole movie. Each scene has to establish who is in the scene, where it is, when it is and what is happening. What is happening is very important. There needs to be something happening in each scene. At the end of every scene, you should be able to answer the question "So what?" with a response showing why that scene is important to the overall movie.

STEP 6: The scene heading – First you need to give the scene heading. This tells where the action is taking place and what time it is, as well as other information the director and actors need to know to make it come out the way you, the writer, envision it.

Type the scene heading left aligned. Left aligned means that the letters start at the far left of the page, just like in this paragraph. Use all capital letters. First, you have to say if the scene is to be shot inside (interior, abbreviated "INT") or outside (exterior, abbreviated "EXT"). Next, put a hyphen in and give the location. Is the action taking place in a house, at an amusement park, in a library? Here are some examples:

```
INT. BASEMENT – MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT
EXT. BEACH – EARLY DAWN
EXT. MALL PARKING LOT – LATE AFTERNOON
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STEP 7: Adding action – You're ready to write the action now. When we're writing a screenplay, we use what is called the literary present tense. That means that we write as though whatever is happening in the scene is happening right now. We write in the present tense only and always. The first time you mention a character's name, put that name all in CAPITALS. Also put anything that makes a sound in caps. That lets script readers easily see who's there and what's going on. Here's an example:

INT. BASEMENT – MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

Dim light filters through high, narrow windows. Children lie sprawled asleep on filthy mattresses on the bare floor. KAREN DIAMOND, 25, is awake, sitting on the lowest step of the wooden staircase with her face in her hands. FOOTSTEPS are heard from the floor above.

STEP 8: Adding characters – Now that you've brought your character into the scene, you probably will

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want the character to speak. There are some rules for that. The character has to be introduced. You introduce the character by indenting his or her name 4.2 inches from the left edge of the paper.

Here's what we've got so far:

```
INT. BASEMENT — MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

Dim light filters through high, narrow windows. Children lie sprawled
asleep on filthy mattresses on the bare floor. KAREN DIAMOND, 25, is awake,
sitting on the lowest step of the wooden staircase with her face in her
hands. FOOTSTEPS are heard from the floor above.

                              KAREN
```

STEP 9: Adding dialogue – Now that she's been introduced, the character can talk! Talking in a movie is called dialogue. Dialogue uses different margins. It should go from 3 inches from the left edge of the paper to 2.5 inches from the right edge. Example:

```
INT. BASEMENT — MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

Dim light filters through high, narrow windows. Children lie sprawled
asleep on filthy mattresses on the bare floor. KAREN DIAMOND, 25, is awake,
sitting on the lowest step of the wooden staircase with her face in her
hands. FOOTSTEPS are heard from the floor above.

                              KAREN

               What am I going to do with all these kids?
               Where are we going to go? How are we going
               to get out of here alive?
```

You as the writer may have an idea of how something should be said or some action that needs to be taking place at the same time. This is called a "parenthetical" because you put it in parentheses. Parentheticals have

their own margin rules. (So many margin rules!) They are indented 3.7 inches from the left and 5.2 inches from the right, for a total width of 1.5 inches. Don't center them under the character's name, even though that looks better. Example:

```
INT. BASEMENT – MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

Dim light filters through high, narrow windows. Children lie sprawled
asleep on filthy mattresses on the bare floor. KAREN DIAMOND, 25, is awake,
sitting on the lowest step of the wooden staircase with her face in her
hands. FOOTSTEPS are heard from the floor above.
```

                                    KAREN
                                  (sighing)
                    What am I going to do with all these kids?
                    Where are we going to go? How are we going
                    to get out of here alive?

You might want your character to move while he/she is talking. To do that, you put the action in, and then you have to introduce your character all over again. You use this (CONT'D) after the name to show that the dialogue continues through the action. Example:

                                    KAREN
                                  (sighing)
                    What am I going to do with all these kids?
                    Where are we going to go? How are we going
                    to get out of here alive?

```
Getting up from the steps, Karen walks over to one of the windows and
stares out of it.
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                                KAREN (CONT'D)
                    There's got to be a way out of here. This alley
                    has to lead somewhere.

This shows that while she is getting up and looking out of the window, she is still talking.

STEP 10: Voiceovers – Sometimes you may want your character to talk in a different way than straight dialogue. Maybe you want the action to continue while the character isn't in the scene, but you can still hear his/her voice. This is called "voiceover" and is abbreviated "V.O." Maybe you want the character to be out of range of the camera, but still participating in the scene. This is called "off-screen" and is abbreviated "O.S."

You show this the same way as you did (CONT'D) by putting an abbreviation to the right of the character's name. Examples:

                        KAREN (CONT'D)
            There's got to be a way out of here. This alley
            has to lead somewhere.

The children start to stir and Karen walks around, helping them get up.

                        KAREN (V.O.)
            Impossible as it seemed, I knew then that our
            only hope lay down that dark alley.

The "V.O." shows the director and actor that the audience will hear her voice, but on the screen her lips won't be moving.

STEP 11: Keeping the beat – If you want your character to pause between sentences or phrases, type in the word "beat" like you would a regular parenthetical. Example:

                        KAREN (V.O.)
            I knew then that our only hope lay down that
            dark alley, as impossible as it seemed.
                    (beat)
            And yet I knew deep down that everything to
            this point had also been impossible.

Lesson 4: More techniques (steps 12-14)

STEP 12: The montage – You may have a scene that is like a collage of images. In screenwriting, this is called a "montage." To write the order of a montage, you start by typing "MONTAGE" in all caps left aligned. Then you number the scenes in the montage in order. You can use capital letters instead of numbers, too. It doesn't matter. Example:

```
MONTAGE

1) KAREN kneels next to a small girl and gently pulls her hair back into a
pony tail.

2) Karen stuffs her belongings into a ragged bag and stares around the
basement, the children gathered around her.

3) Karen uses a broom handle to break the window above her, then lays a
shirt across the bottom of the window sill.

4) Karen lifts the children one by one through the window.

5) When they are all out of the window, Karen looks around again, digs her
toe into the crumbling wall, and boosts herself through the jagged open-
ing, cutting her arm.

6) Empty basement with light growing brighter.
```

STEP 13: The intercut – Another technique you might need is called "intercut." Intercutting is when you have two different scenes going on at the same time. Maybe two characters are on the phone with each other, or maybe two totally different action scenes are happening simultaneously. To do this, you establish the scene in both places, then type "INTERCUT" against the left margin. Explain the intercut in all caps, and then type the dialogue or action normally. Example:

```
EXT. ALLEY – MORNING

KAREN is running down the alley holding two children by the hand while the
others follow.

INT. BASEMENT – MORNING

Three MEN stand in the empty basement, looking around at the mattresses
and broken window, guns drawn.

INTERCUT BETWEEN KAREN WITH CHILDREN AND MEN

Karen turns off the alleyway onto a busy street and slows to a walk.

The men run up the stairs.

Karen sees a police car and heads towards it.

The men run out of the house and around the back to the alley where they
find a sweater dropped by one of the children.

Karen sees the police officer and freezes in fear.

The men run down the alley, looking down cross streets.
```

STEP 14: Do it right! It is very important that you use perfect spelling and grammar. Have someone else check it for you. Don't rely on your computer program's checker; it is not always accurate. Screenwriting is a serious business. If you want to be taken seriously, you can't have misspelled words and poorly constructed sentences.

Lesson 5: Learning more (step 15)

STEP 15: Practice, Practice, Practice! To practice, you need to do three things: read, watch, and write.
● Read books on screenwriting; see the Extension section for suggestions.
● Next, you need to watch movies carefully. Can you see the intercuts? When you hear dialogue, think about what parentheticals you would use to make it sound like that. When you see a montage, think about how you would write that out.
● Lastly, you need to write. No matter how good your idea is, it will never have what it takes to make a real movie if it's not turned into a script. Read, watch, write!

If you finish a screenplay, check out copyright.gov to find out how to copyright it.

Extension

Books
- Field, Syd. *Screenplay*
- Flinn, Denny Martin. *How Not to Write a Screenplay: 101 Common Mistakes Most Screenwriters Make*
- Hunter, Lew. *Lew Hunter's Screenwriting 434: The Industry's Premier Teacher Reveals the Secrets of the Successful Screenplay*
- Iglesias, Karl. *The 101 Habits Of Highly Successful Screenwriters: Insider's Secrets from Hollywood's Top Writers*
- Lazarus, Tom. *Secrets of Film Writing*
- Press, Skip. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Screenwriting*
- Straczynski, J. Michael. *The Complete Book of Scriptwriting*
- Trottier, David. *The Screenwriter's Bible: A Complete Guide to Writing, Formatting, and Selling Your Script*

Etcetera
- screenwritersutopia.com
- writerswrite.com/screenwriting
- wordplayer.com
- sydfield.com

Assessment

The assessment for this lesson has two components. The first is a terminology quiz. The second is a rubric to be used when the student creates a screenplay.

Screenplay Writing Terminology Quiz

1. The "what if" question that says what the story is about is called what?
   A. basis
   B. high concept
   C. story board
   D. reason

2. If a writer wants the director to switch back and forth between one scene and another, he/she would use this technique:
   A. switcheroo
   B. intercession
   C. montage
   D. intercut

3. If a character is speaking from out of the scene, but is still in the scene, the writer would use which of the following abbreviations?
   A. O.O.S.
   B. V.O.
   C. O.C.
   D. O.S.

4. The writer uses which of the following words to show that a character pauses in the middle of talking:
   A. pause
   B. resume
   C. beat
   D. wait

5. If the character is not in the scene but action is going on and you can hear the character's voice talking, what is the abbreviation used in the script?
   A. V.O.
   B. O.S.
   C. O.V.
   D. S.O.

6. Look at the following script and find the errors. Line through each error and correct it.

```
INT. – DECK of a boat at NIGHT

Samantha leans over the railing of the boat. Foghorns blare on the water.
JIM comes out of the cabin and stands next to her.
```

                                   JIM
                         (whispering)
                         Did you see Dad yet? I've been waiting forever.

                                 SAMANTHA
                    No. I think he left with those men in the dinghy.

```
Samantha stands up and starts walking toward the front of the boat. Jim
follows behind her.
```

                              SAMANTHA (cont'd.)
                         And I don't think we'll ever know why, Jim. I
                         really don't.

                              MOTHER (V.O.)
                         Samantha! Jim! Where are you?

Answer key

1. B
2. D.
3. O.S.
4. beat
5. V.O.
6. Errors in bold-italics and corrected:

EXT. DECK OF A BOAT – NIGHT

SAMANTHA leans over the railing of the boat. Foghorns *BLARE* on the water. JIM comes out of the cabin and stands next to her.

> JIM
> **(whispering)**
> Did you see Dad yet? I've been waiting forever.

> **SAMANTHA**
> No. I think he left with those men in the din-
> ghy.

Samantha stands up and starts walking toward the front of the boat. Jim follows behind her.

> SAMANTHA **(CONT'D)**
> And I don't think we'll ever know why, Jim. I
> really don't.

> MOTHER **(O.S.)**
> Samantha! Jim! Where are you?

Screenplay rubric

Category	4	3	2	1	Score
Grammar & Spelling (conventions)	Writer makes no errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.	Writer makes 1-2 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.	Writer makes 3-4 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.	Writer makes more than 4 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.	
Flow & Rhythm (sentence fluency)	All sentences sound natural and are easy on the ear when read aloud. Each sentence is clear and has an obvious emphasis.	Almost all sentences sound natural and are easy on the ear when read aloud, but 1 or 2 are stiff, awkward, or difficult to understand.	Most sentences sound natural and are easy on the ear when read aloud, but several are stiff, awkward or difficult to understand.	The sentences are difficult to read aloud because they sound awkward, are distractingly repetitive, or difficult to understand.	
Story Choice	Writer uses a vivid story that lingers in the reader's mind due to strong characters and lots of action.	Writer uses an acceptable story that has fairly strong characters and a moderate amount of action.	Writer uses a marginal story that has stereotypical characters and/or too little action.	Writer uses a poor story that has weak characters and/or too little action. The script contains many formatting errors.	
Formatting	The formatting is correct in virtually every detail.	The formatting is correct for the most part, with very few errors to distract the reader.	The formatting is contains several errors that distract from the reading experience.	There are excessive errors in terminology and/or abbreviations.	
Terminology	Correct terminology and abbreviations are used throughout the screenplay.	Correct terminology and abbreviations are used with few exceptions.	There are fundamental and/or multiple errors in terminology and abbreviations.		
Techniques	Script contains all techniques taught, including montage, parentheticals, the use of beats, voiceovers, off-screen dialogue, and continued dialogue.	Script contains many of the techniques taught, including montage, parentheticals, the use of beats, voiceovers, off-screen dialogue, and continued dialogue.	Script contains some of the techniques taught.	Script contains few of the techniques taught.	