

Fresh Shorts Screenwriting Tips

Story Ideas

Finding your story.

Ideas can come from anywhere: what are the stories you keep coming back to when spinning yarns having a drink with mates, confiding with a friend or holding court at a dinner party – why are they interesting; what parts of the story are essential to include to keep listener's ears pricked? Read, watch, listen ... look out the window. Read short stories, news, and family history even?! When do you lose interest? Why? What are the events that are important in your life or the situations (real or virtual) that provoke a visceral response or make the hairs on your neck stand up? What do you care about? Tap it and see if there's a story there that has to be seen on screen.

Paul Stanley Ward

List the films, songs, art and books you admire. Think of the sorts of stories you want to tell and have a vision for how to get them made. What do you want to say about the world?

Paul Stanley Ward

Find the balance between writing to your budget and not stifling your creativity.

If you are limited by a low budget, don't let that limit your story. You don't need to use loads of spectacular locations or hundreds of actors to make your story interesting. Often the best short films are really simple small ideas!

I began by writing what I know. Experiences you have lived are always a good start when writing as you can rely on the detail that 'you know' when creating. It will generally be imbued with heart too and give the work depth.

Louis Sutherland


Write to your strengths and write what you know; it's old advice but it's true. If you're good at writing dialogue then explore that territory. If you're more visual then write in pictures.

And yes, write something authentic.

Taika Waititi

Avoid clichéd storytelling.

You can still write about a subject or event that has been a popular topic of films in the past. In fact a lot of great short films are successful because they are based around themes that are universally recognisable, enabling your audience to relate to them – just



try and put a different perspective or spin on them. Think outside the square and think about how you can make your story different, so it stands out from the crowd.

Consider using dialogue sparingly.

It is surprising how little dialogue a lot of great short films have. Use the actions and reactions of your character to express things or allude to things. With a novel you can explain what is going on in your character's head descriptively, but with film we have to show what a character may be thinking or feeling through their actions.

Don't overly worry about structure or duration when you are initially attacking a first draft. You can always edit later. Let it flow and get as many ideas out on the page as possible. It's always easier to cut than to add later.

Louis Sutherland

Take time out from the page; put it away for a while and come back to it with fresh eyes. You'll be surprised how a piece of ill-judged conjecture might transform to common sense after a wee break. Give yourself space away from deadlines (sometimes impossible!) to find solutions and let solutions find you, whether that's going for a run or something less Heart Foundation recommended. Get out of the cabin regularly. Paul Stanley Ward

The Basics of Screenwriting

A world, a character and a problem.

Most short films focus on one moment or event in the life of one main character, which are likely to be a moment of universal significance, a moment that is significant to the protagonist (even if they don't know it at the time), a moment that creates a situation in which the stakes are high for the protagonist.

Who is the main character? What is driving them? (A want, need, or obligation?)


What is their problem? (character vs. character, character vs. self, character vs. society, character vs. nature, character vs. fate)

How will the audience recognise the problem?

Are the stakes high enough? Will the audience care? Do they know what the character stands to lose?

Am I telling the story from the best point of view? The meaning of any story is attached to the character through whom the story is told. It must be clear to the audience





from the start who the film is about so it's worth asking yourself the above questions and getting them clear for yourself before you start getting stuck into the details of the story.

Some tips for writing dramatic description!

- Use words that translate to film IMAGES.
- Write simple, direct sentences. Avoid AS, WHILE or AND sentence constructions.
- No CAMERA DIRECTIONS: instead of calling for a low angle shot, note that your character (for example) *FLOATS* above the steps or *LOOMS* above the antagonist. Similarly, rather than calling for a close up, motivate your reader to "see" one: a single teardrop *cascades* down her cheek. ONE EXCEPTION: the INSERT shot – for an object only, like a newspaper headline, photograph or similar that your viewer must be able to decipher. In that case use the following format:
INSERT: A headline blares, "MAN SHOT IN DOMESTIC INCIDENT/3 injured."
BACK TO SCENE:
Alice drops the newspaper.
- Use ACTIVE VOICE and PRESENT TENSE: "Character *GAZES AT* prop," not "Prop is *GAZED AT* by character;" "Character *SHRIEKS*," not 'Character *SHRIEKED*'.

Developing Your Script

It's very rare for the first or second draft of your script to be the one that is finally shot. Sometimes you will need to do many drafts before it is right for you. Show your script to a friend and then pick their brains about it afterwards - find out if they got what you were trying to say, and if not, why not.

You must be able to take criticism without letting your ego get in the way. Sometimes people may be overly hard in their critique in your view. Suck it in and read between the lines to realise what they are actually meaning. Put the work first.


Louis Sutherland

Trust your instincts when writing. Take on board all the feedback you need and definitely trust/respect those that are experienced and willing to give you advice (it's a gift) - but above all remember (and this isn't a cop-out) 'no-one knows your story like you do!'

Louis Sutherland

Be open to a collaborative relationship but also have a strong sense of what the story is that you want to tell and ensure as much as possible that you trust your other team





members to realise that vision. Be prepared to support them as well, and that will almost certainly require sacrifice and patience. These relationships are as intense and complicated as friendships. Collaborators should be open and support each other to achieve a vision. It's a mysterious relationship, that needs enduring mutual respect to survive, and even then its health will be often challenged. Be prepared for that to happen.

Paul Stanley Ward

Writing films - short or long form - is hard, slow, frustrating work; it will reveal the worst parts of your character and the character of those you're collaborating with. But it's also fun, creatively fulfilling and there's nothing like the nervous, proud thrill of seeing your story realised on a big screen as a result of a thrilling collaboration between shared talent. Those rare (miraculous?) moments, head tilted up at screen, lump pitted at the bottom of your throat, are awesome alchemy and your experience of them is hopefully the reason you're writing in the first place!

Paul Stanley Ward

How to Storyboard

There are no hard and fast rules about storyboarding, so you can do it in a way that best suits you. However, to get the most out of the exercise there are a few things you can do to make life easier for yourself.

Try to find someone who has reasonable drawing skills or can create them on the computer. Don't be afraid to make changes as you start to visualise your story. Storyboarding should help you realise where you can cut back in your script.

You are expressing visual information for the camera when you storyboard, e.g. where is the camera in relation to the actor? What is visible in the foreground and background? Is it a closeup? Arrows are your best friend when storyboarding; express the actions and camera movements with arrows.

Thank you for the words from:

Paul Stanley Ward - Writer *Choice Night* & *The Graffiti of Mr. Tupaia*
Louis Sutherland - Writer/Director *The Six Dollar Fifty Man*
Taika Waititi - Writer/Director *Two Cars One Night*, *Tama Tu* and *Boy*

For further information about Fresh Shorts email talentdev@nzfilm.co.nz or call our Talent Development Team on 0800 659 754.

