**Topic Page: Screenwriting**

**Definition:** screenwriting from Collins English Dictionary

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1 the profession of writing screenplays

**Summary Article: screenwriting**
from Encyclopedia of Early Cinema

The practice of screenwriting and the standardization of screenwriting rules developed rapidly and stabilized almost as quickly. In less than twenty years—from 1896 to 1914—when feature films had become an established format, the screenplay evolved from a few written lines describing the action and characters involved in the story to become a lengthy script of fifteen pages or more per reel of film.

In early cinema, screenwriting went hand in hand with the desire to tell stories. The practice of writing scripts intended for film production began as early as 1896, with the creation of the first sujets composés written by Georges Méliès. He probably was the first to have written stories destined specifically for moving pictures. One of his early films, *Le manoir du diable* (October 1896), tells of the struggle between Mephistopheles and Satan in a medieval cave.

The expression, *scénario cinématographique*, was first used in French by Méliès as a subtitle for his *Le voyage dans la lune* [A Trip to the Moon] (1902). The surviving script is three pages long, divides into thirty scenes, and details very clearly the action to be shot and the characters’ roles in the story. According to Jean Giraud’s dictionary of film terms (1958), the word *scénario* dates only from 1907. Yet original screenplays that survive in manuscript show otherwise. The first American script legally to be termed a scenario (or dramatic composition), for instance, was American-Mutoscope and Biograph's *Tom, Tom the Piper's Son* (1904).

From 1896 to 1901, scenarios were written in synopsis form and rarely were longer than one paragraph. Many, in fact, were even shorter: they included a title and a one-line description of the action to be seen. Perhaps the most famous was Lumière's *L'arroseur arrosé* [The Gardener and the Bad Boy] (1895). However concise these short descriptive titles may have been, their brevity mirrored the films’ length: less than sixty seconds.

Indeed, these short early descriptions contain the essential and most fundamental screenwriting elements: characters and a story with a beginning, middle, and end (but not always). Not yet long enough to be considered screenplays, these evocative titles are nonetheless the first texts written in reference to a cinematographic moving image. They can be found in the catalogues of film companies such as Lumière (1901), Lubin (1903), and many others. These catalogues contain extremely interesting information for the study of early cinema.

For example, it was a common practice to print the screenplays in full (long mistakenly considered to be merely summaries) in company catalogues. In fact, early scripts were not only used as publicity material but also helped exhibitors explain the story to new, inexperienced spectators. For the first ten years or so, exhibitors would often hire a lecturer or *bonimenteur* to comment on and clarify the story during the
projection of the film. Concerned about the spectator’s inability to grasp emerging cinematographic modes of representation, Méliès later blamed himself for having presented elaborate stories too quickly, before the gradual education of the neophyte film spectator was completed.

Yet Méliès’ self-doubt was unfounded. By 1902, his storytelling style was popular enough to inspire Edwin S. Porter at Edison to direct story films such as Jack and the Beanstalk (1902). As stories became more elaborate, so did the editing principles. Both techniques—screenwriting and editing—relied on one another to achieve narrative clarity and cinematographic storytelling fluidity. It was only when Porter gained some knowledge and control of editing that he interested himself in story films with more complex narrative structures, such as The Life of an American Fireman (1902–1903) and The Great Train Robbery (1903). Early stories rarely were original, however, because the first manufacturers required subjects that satisfied public understanding and demands. The first decades, therefore, were years of adaptations (in all the meanings of that term).

In fact, the practice of writing screenplays evolved directly from 18th- and 19th-century literary and theatrical traditions.

Not only did the screenplay share common subjects with the stage play, for instance, but both were texts that conveyed a written story to a future spectator by the use of sequential scenes, a clear description of the action to be seen and of the characters’ motives to be represented. In fact, the screenplay form (a text divided into numbered tableaux or scenes) and content (story sources) owed much to previous texts and spectacles. Méliès’s Le voyage dans la lune was adapted from an 1891 stage attraction, L’Astre des nuits; Edison’s The Life of an American Fireman was inspired by the lantern slide story, Bob the Fireman: or Life in the Red Brigade (1880); Histoire d’un crime, written and filmed by Ferdinand Zecca for Pathé-Frères, was first seen in wax tableaux at the Musée Grévin wax museum (1880) in Paris.

In 1902–1903, it became standard screenwriting practice to divide the story into scenes. Ambitious writers such as Zecca became experts in synthesizing such long stories as Les aventures de Don Quichotte de la Manche [Adventures of Don Quixote] (1903, 430 meters) into a minimal number of scenes. However striking an example, the majority of screenplays before 1906–1907 were still only two to four pages long, corresponding to the length of the films themselves. As for narrative developments, the screenplays produced after 1902 reveal a desire to help the story unfold in a continuous manner by better sequencing the main story points, as is evident in Méliès’s script for Voyage à travers l’impossible [The Impossible Voyage] (1904). Notions of time, space, cutting and continuity came to the forefront of many scenario writer’s preoccupations.

As editing techniques gained momentum, screenwriters took more and more liberty in writing stories that would, for example, occur simultaneously in two different locales or that would, by moving from one scene to the next, integrate time and space ellipses. For example, Gaumont’s L’acrobate [The Acrobat] (1907) has a mother caring for her children at home while the father is performing as an acrobat at the theater, and the story alternates between the two situations. Pathé screenplays were even more complicated, often using flash-backs, parallel actions, and off-screen events, as in Pauvres gosses [Poor Children] and La policière [Police] (both 1907). They confirm that screenplays were written with an awareness that the spectator participated in constructing the story; they did not simply rely on showing events in a consecutive, less dramatic way.

After 1907, narratives typically grew more elaborate and detailed as the public’s demand for better
stories was met by screenwriters with a more literary background. Having a name became important. Previously, writers preferred to use pseudonyms, unsure about the artistic validity of this new popular amusement. From then on, well-known writers such as Henri Lavedan in France offered their talent and reputation to the practice of screenwriting, most notably in Film d’Art’s *L’assassinat du duc de Guise* [The Assassination of the Duke de Guise] (1908). By specializing in adaptations of classical literary and theatrical pieces, companies such as Film d’Art gave stature to the cinema.

If moving pictures never had seemed so silent as when famous plays were being adapted to the screen, from the perspective of screenwriting this was hardly alarming. For, the screenplays of this period were rarely silent. They regularly gave precise instructions about the content of the intertitles and offered dialogue lines to be spoken by the characters. They also often used sound as a dramatic element in the storytelling, clearly establishing moving pictures as an audiovisual medium well before the advent of the technology of synchronous sound itself. For example, a great number of screenplays—from Edison's *Appointment by Telephone* (1902) to Pathé's *Deux voleurs qui n'ont pas de chance* [Two Luckless Thieves] (1907) or *Rigadin, garçon de banque* [Rigadin, the Bank Teller] (1912)—have characters listening behind closed doors or talking on the telephone, robbers getting caught because they make too much noise, or characters unexpectedly overhearing crucial information.

As the practice of writing screenplays grew indispensable, so did screenwriting rules to establish a cinematographic way to tell stories. Companies began to advertise the do’s and don’ts of screenwriting to save time in reformatting the amateur screenplays they now were soliciting. The increasing need for original ideas reached an all-time peak in 1911, and coincided with two transforming events: the advent of the feature film and the U.S. Supreme Court Ruling about copyright law restricting the use of theatrical and literary material. Both helped institutionalize the craft of filmmaking.

Thus, not surprisingly, the first general screenwriting rules appeared in the USA in 1911, in articles written by Epes Winthrop Sargent and published in Moving Picture World. In France, screenwriting rules first appeared in journals such as Ciné-Journal (1909) and *Créma-Revue* (1912), written, respectively, by Edmond Claris and Eugène Kress. Between 1912 and 1923, no less than 109 screenwriting manuals were published in English alone. The first to appear, Sargent’s *The Technique of the Photoplay* (1911), is very detailed, and its precision about what can and cannot work in a screenplay confirmed screenwriting as a specialized practice. Screenwriters clearly were encouraged to master cinematographic language in order to avoid audiovisual redundancy and unrealistic production costs and to use the new medium to its maximum dramatic potential. With this newfound knowledge came a certain degree of renown for screenwriters—and that year Edison decided to give screen credit to scenario writers.

But the most important change came with the introduction of the multiple-reel film (of two to three reels) and the feature film (of four reels or more). The Europeans led the way, most notably the Italians, Danish, and French, moving quickly to features between 1911 and 1912. In the USA, the introduction of the multiple-reel format was established between fall 1911 and spring 1912, whereas that of the feature film format took longer. With the introduction of multiple-reel and feature films, screenplays lengthened to a minimum of fifteen pages per reel, finally offering narrative space to explore subjects in depth. This gave writers space to create a coherent fictional universe, develop the psychology of characters, and freed them from condensing a Jules Verne novel or a Shakespeare play into a few scenes of key moments.

The lengthening of the stories had yet another long-term transformative effect: in the USA, in
particular, it led to the development of scenario departments that would, for efficiency’s sake, break up the creative process of writing into standardized steps. In fact, the studios gave precedence to economic considerations over the creative aspect of inventing stories. Riding the wave of Taylorism, the studios applied the principle of division of labor to film production. Around 1912, scenario departments started replicating factory production work by subdividing the screenwriting process into individual and near autonomous tasks. At the head of the line were readers paid to recognize potential ideas; writers would then adapt promising suggestions into synopsis form, followed by a scene-by-scene scenario that would be further expanded and dialogued to become a shooting script. Not only did this new management style transform forever the modes of production, but screenplays were thus consecrated as indispensable blueprints of future films. However, far from being read as original pieces of writing, scripts primarily were used by producers to evaluate their risks and control the costs of each film. In a system developed most clearly by Thomas Ince, cost efficiency overruled most creative endeavors. From then on, screenwriting would be considered a “technique” and not be construed as an art.

By 1914, a standard form of the feature-length screenplay was recognized and used in Europe as well as the USA. Writers no longer used pseudonyms; instead they insisted on having their names listed in the screen credits. The craft of screen-writing was now recognized and well paid: even an unknown writer could get $20US for writing an unsolicited scenario. In many ways, the screenplay format and creative constraints developed for early cinema are still the norm in screenwriting practices today.

Note: between 1907 and 1923, more than fifteen thousand screenplays were deposited for copyright purposes at the Bibliothèque nationale in France.

See also: editing: spatial relations; editing: temporal relations

Further reading


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