# PRODUCING AND DIRECTING THE SHORT FILM AND VIDEO

Peter W. Rea and David K. Irving

**FIFTH EDITION**

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# Preface: Fifth Edition

Since the fourth edition, the range of options available for the beginning filmmaker has multiplied tenfold. High definition (HD) has integrated itself firmly into production, distribution, and exhibition. Professional postproduction software once linked to an editing system that filled a room can now be loaded onto a laptop. Essentially, anyone with a digital camera and a laptop is able to create a film that has the look and feel of a professional product.

Equally noteworthy, social networking channels such as YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, Vimeo, Twitter, etc. have altered the communication landscape. Broadband has helped usher in a true "Convergence of Media."

While film as a capture medium is still valid in today's market, the recent documentary *Side by Side* clarifies the shift from film to digital. It examines the demise of photo chemical film and the rise of digital image capture, a trend that is moving ever more rapidly. The introduction of both the Alexa and Red Epic cameras has convinced most in the cinematography community that digital filmmaking is as professional a capture and delivery system as film.

Many traditional film labs have already converted their business model to becoming full service postproduction facilities: editing, finishing, equipment rentals, and other services. In addition, Arriflex, Panavision, and Aaton have ceased production of film cameras to focus exclusively on design and manufacture of digital cameras. Finally, digital projection systems are close to being ubiquitous in North American theaters.

Very few of these changes affect the text in this book. Telling a story visually is juxtaposing one image with another and then next to another, the sum of which makes a narrative, documentary, animation, or experimental piece. However one captures the image, manipulates it editorially, or projects it for an audience, the basic steps of visual storytelling have been the same for the hundred plus years since film was invented. Technological advances can aid the process, but not sidestep any of the steps. The responsibilities of a producer and a director are directly tied to their hearts and minds, not their toys. No matter what the tools, art is created out of the heart.

In this age of multiple media sources competing for our attention, it is important to understand that "content" is still king. More and more festivals have been sprouting up yearly. Making your presence felt in the expanding market for shorts and a flooded Internet requires that you create a product that rises above the thousands of daily entries. Having something to say and saying it well never goes out of fashion.

To aid you in your quest, this edition boasts the addition of two award winning narrative short films. We have included a strategy for using a web site designed for your project as an effective tool for preproduction, production, and distribution that is woven in the text.

Also, this being the book's twentieth anniversary, we have opted to revisit the original filmmakers and add a section in which we ask, "where are they now?," a nod to Michael Apted's "7 Up" documentary series. We hope you find their circuitous paths edifying.

## *EFFICIO COGNOSIO* (LEARN BY DOING)

There is no substitute for experience. In this book, we want to emphasize the importance of the School of Hard Knocks. Whether you are in a film or media program or making a project on your own, this is an excellent time to be studying filmmaking.

There is no better way to learn how to make a film than by actually doing it. Books and manuals can serve as guides. Other films can act as inspiration, and talking about and critiquing films can trigger ideas. However, the two best teachers are failure and success. Experiencing the process of putting together a

project, building work muscles, and understanding the craft and discipline of the process are ultimately the best ways to develop your skills.

## THE POWER OF THE MEDIA

Finally, your short film has the potential to influence a great many people. Coupled with the wide distribution of media is the issue of the power of their content to influence. We are now grappling with crucial problems, from overpopulation to racial discrimination, from management of the earth's resources to the management of human resources. Film and video have a powerful voice in the dialogue about these challenges. Our hope is that in expressing yourself in this fashion, you will consider the world in which it will be viewed and will use your talents wisely.

# Acknowledgments

## FIFTH EDITION

Now translated into five languages, this, the 20th anniversary edition, has impacted several generations of filmmakers. We are indebted to all the teachers, filmmakers, editors, friends, and family members who have contributed to making this textbook a practical guide for young filmmakers the world over. We would like to thank Sharon Badal, Thomas Byrnes, Joe Citta, John Crawford, Christina DeHaven, Steven Michals, Matthew Polis, Alex Raspa, Frank Reynolds, and Ezra Sacks for their contribution to the fifth edition.

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# Introduction

Why make a short film? The idea of being in a darkened screening room and watching your film touch an audience is exciting. There is deep satisfaction in communicating on this basic level. The fantasy of creating something that has an emotional impact on others is what motivates many people to go into picture making in the first place. There is, also, the artistic satisfaction.

Most short works are created to give filmmakers an opportunity to express themselves, display their talent, and develop filmmaking skills; to experiment with the medium; or to provide a stepping stone to a career in film and television. The key advantage to making a short is learning the filmmaking process on a project of manageable scale.

If the work turns out well, shorts can be entered into any of the hundreds of national and international festivals. They provide validation for your filmmaking skills and opportunities to meet people who can further your career. The producer and director can parlay awards and the fame of winning competitions into meetings, agents, and (ideally) employment.

The market for "shorts" has been traditionally limited. Rarely did shorts recoup their investments, let alone make money. For these reasons, the creation of a short work was usually motivated by considerations other than profit.

Over the years, however, opportunities for distribution and exhibition have grown substantially. Traditional distribution outlets still exist (see Chapter 16 "Distribution"), but the short film can now be exhibited to a worldwide audience across myriad platforms. With this kind of exposure come expanding opportunities for beginners to profit from their work. As Internet speeds get faster and screen resolutions get better—successful delivery of short films via the web becomes much more realistic. From iTunes to iPods to webisodes, and with a myriad of new tablet devices, the short form finds itself a good fit with the new technologies of the twenty-first century.

## INTERNET

What has made many of these opportunities for filmmaking possible is the growth of the Internet and its potential to create an integrated and consistent message across all media. It is now possible to create responsive web pages and new video compression types and techniques that can display on any size screen from mobile phones to movie screens. As you develop your short film idea, the web can be used to promote awareness of your project, to raise funds, to reach out to cast and crew, and eventually to act as a distribution outlet. The Internet is a tool and, as such, can be employed to whatever extent you wish. We will outline many of the possibilities throughout the book. It is up to you, the filmmaker, to decide to what extent you wish to avail yourself of its possibilities.

## CRAFT VERSUS ART AND COLLABORATION

Moving pictures are arguably the greatest art form of the 20th century. After all, the medium combines elements of literature, art, theater, photography, dance, and music, but is in itself a unique form. For the sake of all beginning filmmakers who read this book, we take off the pressure by refusing to emphasize the creation of art. Instead, we stress the craft of storytelling, and telling a story well is not an easy task. Telling a short story well is even more difficult.

For us, it is difficult to think of filmmaking as an "art-making" endeavor. Orson Welles probably did not intend to make art when he conceived and produced *Citizen Kane*. Instead, he probably set out to make the best film he could from a particular script. The result was a well-crafted film, which was later deemed to be one of the finest feature films ever made and ultimately came to be considered "art." This label

has more to do with the consensus of a critical audience long after the fact than it does with the intention of the filmmaker. Our advice to you is to set out to shoot the best short story you can and let the audience decide whether it is art.

Let's not give Welles all the credit for the success of *Citizen Kane*. Filmmaking is a collaborative enterprise in which many creative people lend their expertise to the director's vision. Too many ingredients affect the outcome of a film to allow any one person to take credit for its success. Welles himself said that "making a film is like painting a picture with an army." He thought so much of the contribution of his cinematographer, Greg Toland, to the film's success that he shared a card with him in the closing credits of *Citizen Kane*.

Above all, to make a successful short film, the entire creative team must share a passion for the material and the process. If there is no passion, the process will be no more than going through the motions of manufacturing a product. Lack of passion shows on the screen.

## WHAT ARE THE STEPS?

How do you go about making a successful short film? Picture making is a complex and demanding activity, even for the experienced. A myriad of problems inevitably arises involving script, crew, budget, casting, lighting, and so on. Each project has its own unique set of challenges. For example, one film might need a difficult location such as Grand Central Station; another might call for a school gymnasium or an old-fashioned barbershop.

One script might require a talented young boy who must also be meek and scrawny; another might need a homeless person. One project might run out of money before postproduction; another budget might not allow for crucial special effects. Even before starting production, you must understand sophisticated technical crafts; resource management; political and social interaction; and personal, financial, and professional responsibility.

The process of producing a film, whether it is a half-hour or a five-minute piece, has been refined over the years and developed into an art. As you will discover, there is a straightforward logic behind these steps—a logic governed by the management of time, talent, and resources. Each step is informed by pragmatism and common sense:

- **Script development**. Your script must be well crafted before preproduction can begin.
- **Preproduction**. The production must be efficiently organized before the camera can roll.
- **Production**. The project must be shot before it can be edited.
- **Postproduction**. The project must be edited before it can be distributed.
- **Distribution/exhibition**. A film that is not seen or experienced by an audience serves only as an exercise.

This list is only a broad outline of what must happen during the production of a short work. It describes the general flow of activity, but it does not address what these steps mean or when and how they must be performed. Translating an idea into a film involves the execution of thousands of details over a long period of time. In fact, the success of any film project relies as much on management as it does on storytelling. Knowing where to put the camera to capture the right dramatic moment of a scene requires as much skill as marshaling the necessary people, equipment, and supplies to the location in the first place. One can't happen without the other.

## THE ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

*Producing and Directing the Short Film and Video* is organized according to the general logic of how a short work is assembled. Each of the preceding stages of script development, preproduction, production, and postproduction is fleshed out in detail with concrete examples. Our goal is to impart to the beginner a fundamental understanding of what is required to organize and execute the production of a successful short picture. Bear in mind, though, that no two shows are alike and that there are no rules. This book is a guide, not a formula.

In addition, we have divided each chapter into two parts, reflecting the management, or "producing," skills and the storytelling, or "directing," skills. Presenting a clear picture of what the producer and director is doing at any given time gives the novice a detailed understanding of and respect for the processes of both producing and directing, one step at a time, from idea to final print. It can also serve as a practical guide to help navigate through creative and managerial straits.

## PRODUCER AND DIRECTOR

Unfortunately, students and beginners often find themselves taking on the dual role of the producer and director. Having to tackle two very different and complex responsibilities at the same time puts undue and unnecessary pressure on the novice. This problem

exists for many reasons. Primarily, it is that the director, in most cases, financially supports the project and either can't find someone willing to do the job or is unable to trust someone to manage her money properly. The burden of having to direct and produce can have a deleterious impact on either important function. We discourage it.

If and when a producer does become involved with a student production, that individual often serves as either production manager or glorified "go-fer." Neither of these situations results in what could and should be a creative partnership, one that we believe best serves the needs of any production.

## The Producer

The most misunderstood and mysterious role in the filmmaking process is that of the producer. We've been asked hundreds of times, "What does a producer actually do?" That his role is a mystery to most laypeople is not altogether surprising. The producer's position in the film and television industry is amorphous and has varying definitions. In addition, the producer never has the same job description from one project to another, and on many kinds of films, it is common to see from four to eight names with one of these producing titles:

- Executive in Charge of Production
- Executive Producer
- Producer
- Co-Producer
- Line Producer
- Assistant Producer
- Associate Producer

In this book, we use the term *producer* primarily to describe the driving force in the making of a short. We refer to this person as the "creative" producer. We also use *producer* to describe the person who engineers all the elements necessary for the creative and business aspects of production. This is the role of producer as *production manager*. In Chapter 6 "Crew," this position is described in depth.

A movie begins with an adaptation from an existing short story, a script, an original idea, a true story, or simply an image that has dramatic and visual potential. The imagination and belief that such an idea or story can be transformed into a motion picture are what begin the process. What is not widely understood is that the producer can be, and often is, the creative instigator of most films: the one with the original inspiration who launches the project and then sails it home,

with himself as the captain. This is the individual who is involved in all stages of production, from development to distribution.

In a general sense, we could say that without the producer, the picture would not be made. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences gives the Best Picture Award to the producer of a film. This is the industry's acknowledgment that the producer is the person who is responsible for putting the pieces together, the person who creates the whole.

One of those previously named producers may have initiated the project but not have the necessary skills or experience to "manage" it. One of the main elements—if not the most important—is the money. The producer is also responsible for raising it, budgeting it, and ultimately accounting for it to the investors. The producer as *production manager*, commonly called the *line producer*, is also in charge of coordinating the logistics of the production that are outlined throughout out the book (see Figure 1.1 for producer's responsibilities).

## The Director

Because of the superstar directors, including Spike Lee, Martin Scorsese, Jane Campion, Steven Spielberg, Wes Anderson, Kathryn Bigelow, etc., the role of the film director has taken on a romanticized image. The director shouts "Action," and the whole set swings into motion. The director chats with actors between takes and enjoys posh dinners after the day's wrap.

In reality, the director's work is never done. Because her job is to supply the creative vision for a one-of-a-kind and essentially handmade product, the choice and effect of thousands of decisions fall to her. Solving all creative problems on and off the set is the director's final responsibility, from how much light to what color blouse, from which location to how long a scream. The director alone has the "vision" of the whole film in her head, and she alone is obligated to make the sum of all her decisions throughout the process add up to its fulfillment. The director's goal is to deliver a finished film ready for an audience.

Although the producer strives to support the director's work and the director is the authority figure on the shoot, the director answers to the producer. However, the producer complements the director's work. When the director's decisions affect the budget or the schedule, she consults the producer. The responsibilities of the producer and director often overlap. Ideally, the director and producer should be able to work well together and understand the script in the same way. Picture making is, after all, a creative collaboration.

The director must be demanding but not dictatorial. She must do her best to draw out each cast and crew member by making him feel involved. The director is an active observer. She directs the actors by being part coach, part audience, and part performer. She will stand on her head if necessary to elicit a good performance. The director should have unlimited patience and be methodical, organized, articulate, and succinct. She should be broadly educated in the arts and have a working knowledge of the duties and responsibilities of each member of the team.

The director needs six things to execute a successful short: a good script, a talented cast, a devoted crew, adequate funds, good health, and luck (a major variable in any artist's work).

## SIX SHORT FILMS

In this book's chapters, we try to illustrate that the potential of realizing magic on the screen is directly proportional to the quality of management in the production stages. To help you understand this critical relationship between organization and creative success, we use examples throughout the book from what we consider to be six successful shorts: four narratives, an animated film (also a narrative), and a documentary.

As teachers, we find it difficult to talk generically about production without using examples from specific films. Many basic concepts and terms are alien to the beginner, and relating them to an actual production creates a common reference and a strong context. Throughout each chapter, we quote from the filmmakers' personal narratives about that part of the production process. Citing their films, which you can see and whose scripts you can read, offers concrete evidence of the range of procedures and challenges encountered in producing and directing a short film. The rules of production planning for the short form can also be applied to any live-action (not animated) subject matter, whether it is narrative, documentary, experimental, industrial, or corporate in nature.

The case studies are:

- *Citizen*, an 11-minute color narrative film written and directed by James Darling
- *Crazy Glue*, a 5-minute color stop motion animated short produced and directed by Tatia Rosenthal
- *God of Love*, an 18-minute black-and-white narrative film written and directed by Luke Matheny
- *Memory Lane*, a 16-minute color narrative film written and directed by Jim Taylor
- *Mirror Mirror*, a 17-minute color documentary film produced and directed by Jan Krawitz

- *The Lunch Date*, a 12-minute black-and-white narrative film written and directed by Adam Davidson

Each of these films has won competitions, and two, *God of Love* and *The Lunch Date*, won an Academy Award. *The Lunch Date* has also recently been selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress. The five narratives were made as student films: *God of Love, Memory Lane, Crazy Glue*, and *Citizen* at New York University and *The Lunch Date* at Columbia University. *Mirror Mirror* was made by a documentary filmmaker who teaches at Stanford University.

Why did we choose these films? They are excellent examples of well-produced and well-directed short films. As stories, they are appropriate for the short form. We chose narratives that are similar in length but differ in storytelling styles, subject matter, and production organization. *Crazy Glue*, the animated film, affords us the opportunity to share the experiences and techniques required of this demanding form of film expression. It has also been adapted from another medium.

*Mirror Mirror* was included because the documentary is an important short form. Many young filmmakers explore the documentary as a means of self-expression. Although *Mirror Mirror* is different in nature and structure from most traditional documentaries, the form offered Jan Krawitz a unique arena in which to explore her views.

All six short films are accessible on the Internet. Detailed information on how to access the films can be found on the book's web site.

## THE FILMMAKERS SPEAK

Culled from hours of interviews, relevant quotes from the six short filmmakers have been inserted to support the specific topic of each chapter. We hope that these pearls of wisdom will personalize their experience in producing and directing the short films we use as case studies in our book. The addition of a 'Where Are They Now?' section in the appendix (Appendix H) describes the arc of their careers to date. Check them out on imdb.com.

In addition to the writer/directors, there are quotes from the producer of *Citizen*, Jessalyn Haefele and the producer of *Lunch Date*, Garth Stein.

## CHAPTER BREAKDOWNS

Chapters 1 and 2 cover the development preliminaries that need to be dealt with prior to the preproduction

phase of any project. Each chapter in Parts I and III, which cover the preproduction and distribution processes, begins with the producer's responsibilities. The production and postproduction chapters in Parts II and III begin with the director's duties. The typical timeline graphic shown in the introduction to Part I summarizes the activities of both the producer and director during the process of making a short work. Although determining the specific amount of time needed for each phase is difficult, the following breakdown may provide some insight:

- Financing might be immediately available or might take years to obtain.
- Scripts can come from many sources and may be ready to shoot or could take years to get into shape.

- Preproduction usually requires 2 to 8 weeks.
- Production usually takes somewhere between 1 day and 2 weeks.
- Postproduction details take anywhere from 2 to 10 weeks.
- Distribution can take as long as several months.

## COMPANION WEB SITE

We urge you to bookmark the web site created for this book as a companion guide. Our web site at www.focalpress.com/cw/rea includes links for the short films, the short film screenplays, all the forms in this book, additional forms, extended interviews, plus important additional information for the beginning filmmaker.

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# Timeline

| PRODUCER | DIRECTOR |
|---|---|

**DEVELOPMENT**
**Script**

| Developing the Script | Supervising or Performing Rewrites |
|---|---|

Ideas for scripts can be developed in many ways and come from many sources but there is one fact that cannot be disputed—without a well crafted script, you cannot have a good film.

**Finance**

| Raising the Capital | Pitching the Project |
|---|---|

Both the producer and the director can be engaged in the process of securing financing. Without funds, any preparation for a production is merely an exercise. The two documents required at this phase are a script and a financial planning package, or prospectus.

**PREPRODUCTION**
**Breakdowns**

| Breaking Down the Script | Storyboards and Floor Plans |
|---|---|

Having achieved a tight screenplay, the producer and the director begin breaking down the script to prepare the company for production.

**Schedule**

| Building a Stripboard | Determining the Visual Plan |
|---|---|

The first document made from the breakdowns is the schedule. The producer creates the schedule from the script in conjunction with the director's visual plan for photography.

| **PRODUCER** | **DIRECTOR** |
|---|---|

**Budget**

| Creating a Budget | Shooting for the Moon |
|---|---|

The second document made from the breakdowns is the budget. The budget defines the parameters of what can or cannot be achieved although the director will usually want to "shoot for the moon."

**Crewing**

| Hiring the Crew | Hiring the Crew |
|---|---|

The crew must be to the mutual liking of both the producer and the director. The success of the project depends on their ability to collectively carry out the director's vision of the script. Once a crew member is chosen, the producer negotiates his or her deal.

**Actor**

| Auditions/Rehearsals | Auditions/Rehearsals |
|---|---|

The producer sets up the auditions and aids the director in making choices for the cast. The credibility of the project rests on finding the right actors to portray the characters in your story. Factors to be considered are talent, cost, and availability. The producer organizes and plans the rehearsal schedule. The director uses the rehearsal period to work with the actors to develop their roles and explore organic ways to block the action for the camera.

**Location**

| Securing Locations | Securing Locations |
|---|---|

Working with the DP and art director, the director chooses the locations, and the producer secures them. If a site cannot be secured for the amount allotted in the budget, a new or backup location is explored.

|  | **PRODUCER** | **DIRECTOR** |
|---|---|---|
| **Art Direction** | Assembling the Team | Creating a Look |

The producer assembles the team, headed by the art director, which will help the director create "a look" for the picture. The look must be achieved within the parameters of the budget.

| **Camera** | Support | Collaborate |
|---|---|---|

Like the art department, the producer supports the requests and needs of the camera department. The art director and the camera department, led by the DP, must work hand in glove to support the visual plan of the director.

| **Sound** | Control Environment | Record Clean Tracks |
|---|---|---|

The one ongoing battle on the set (unless you shoot on a sound stage) is the control of noises. The producer must do everything in his power to keep outside noises to a minimum. The director must try to get the best location sound. If the sounds being recorded are "dirty" because of noise, the director must advise the sound person on how she wants to deal with each recording.

| **PRODUCTION Set procedure** | Organize | Inspires |
|---|---|---|

The producer organizes a system for set procedures. It must function like a military operation with the AD as the chief lieutenant. The director sets the tone and mood of the set. Her energy (or lack thereof) defines how well the crew will perform. The producer organizes the cast schedule and is responsible for the cast's morale. The primary role of the director is to create a supportive and creative environment on set. Of all of the departments, Art is the one that is most likely to expand unexpectedly during production. The producer must monitor this expansion while supporting the art director's needs. The director should guide the art department as much as possible to control any inflation of the budget.

|  | **PRODUCER** | **DIRECTOR** |
|---|---|---|
| **POSTPRODUCTION Picture** | Advise Edit | The "Final Draft" |

The director and editor cut the picture and sound to make the best film possible from what was captured on set. The producer acts as an objective viewer and advises the editing team accordingly.

| **Sound** | Supervise Postproduction | Sound Design |
|---|---|---|

Apart from the first day of principal photography, the most important target date is the mix date. The sounds in your film contribute to telling the story as much as a good shot or an outstanding performance.

| **Finishing/Laboratory /Online** | Deliverables | Color Correction |
|---|---|---|

The producer supervises the postproduction workflow, which begins with the choice of acquisition format and ends with what format(s) is required for "deliverables." The director and the director of photography oversee the final "look" of the film, which involves the integration of color correction and visual effects.

| **Distribution/ Exhibition** | Make a Deal | Publicity |
|---|---|---|

The producer is responsible for finding an outlet for the finished product. The director assists in publicizing the film.

# part I

## Preproduction

You have a script you feel strongly about and are eager to get out into the field and begin production. Assuming that you have secured the appropriate funds (or are well on your way to doing so), you are now ready to start *preproduction*. During this phase, you will prepare virtually every element for the filming process. Decisions made during this time are the foundation on which everything else is built. The producer and director share many of these responsibilities. The next 11 chapters of this book indicate the specific responsibilities of each. These responsibilities are outlined in Figures I.1 and I.2.

### THE STUDENT PRODUCER—DIRECTOR CONUNDRUM

Although the producer and director share many of the responsibilities, they each have their own sphere of focus. Our timeline in the beginning of the book (see page xxv) articulates the director's and producer's flow of activity from script to screen. They intersect on creative decisions but veer off on organization and management. They both are involved with choosing a location; however, the location manager scouts these locations and the producer negotiates the deal. The producer works hard to execute the creative plan within the budget.

If the producer and director are one and the same, not only is the important give-and-take lost between the creative desires and the realities of what is possible and affordable, but the director must now do double duty. She must not only choose the right locations for the story, but must also spend hours scouting, negotiating with the tenants, and securing the permits (if necessary). Swamped with "producing or managerial" duties, the novice inevitably puts little time in her role as director. The directorial plan (visual style, floor plans, storyboards, etc.) is often devised at the last minute.

We also acknowledge that "student producers" do not follow the industry model. The director usually brings the money to the table. A student producer's role is more that of a production manager or line producer but, if he does the job right, he can be an indispensable asset and aid to the director. Jessalyn Haefele, the student producer of *Citizen*, says this about producing:

*When James emailed me the original draft of* Citizen *and asked if I would be interested in producing it, I was blown away. The script was very, very good (it was tight and gripped me), but almost more importantly, the entire time I was reading it, I was thinking to myself, "How the heck can I pull this off?" The challenge of actually getting this film made is one of the main reasons I was attracted to this project.*

*There are a lot of great things about producing films, especially student thesis films, but here are a few reasons why, if you ultimately want to be a producer, you can learn more from them than anything else:*

1. *Most student thesis films are self-financed, or the money is already in place. This means that you don't have the pressure of fund-raising on your shoulders, or not having money at the last minute—the money is already there. And even better, it's not your money! It's someone else's, and*

*you get to figure out how to make the best use of it. It's a real, practical learning experience.*

2. *Most (if not all) student films are already provided with production insurance through the school. This means you don't have to blow your budget buying production insurance, and it's really a convenient thing to have.*

3. *You easily have more access to crew members, and there is a good chance that many of them are*

*your classmates and you already have a working relationship with them.*

4. *Mistakes are more easily tolerated, and as a learning environment, there is less pressure. It's a good environment in which to hone your skills and discover what works and what does not.*

Jessalyn Haefele, Producer of *Citizen*
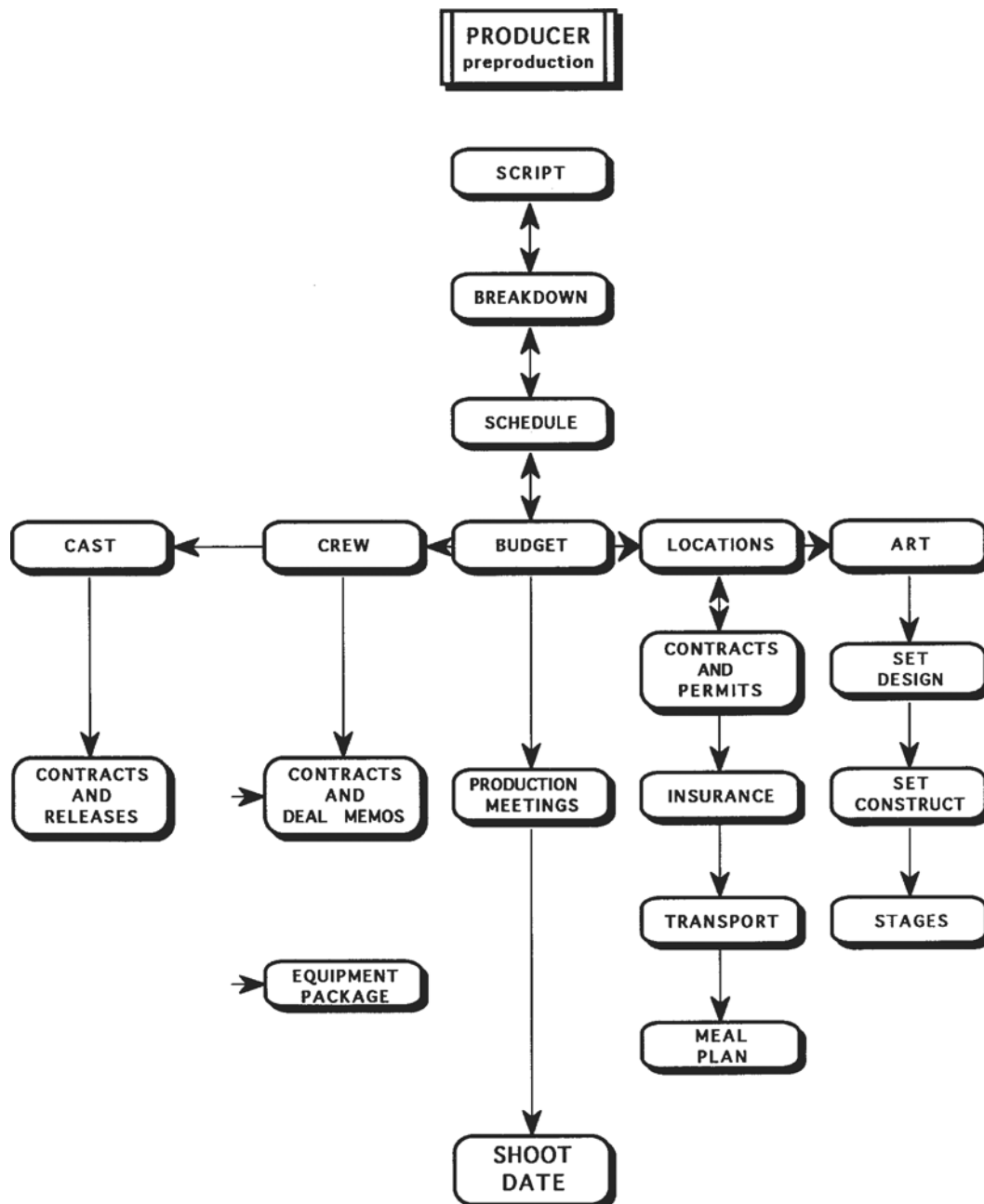


**Figure I.1** Producer's preproduction responsibilities.

DIRECTOR
preproduction

SCRIPT

REWRITES

BREAKDOWNS

ART DIRECTOR

LOCATION SCOUT

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

SET DESIGN

CAST

SHOOTING SCRIPT

COSTUMES

FLOOR PLANS

FINALIZE LOCATIONS

PROPS

STORY-BOARDS

REHEARSAL

SET CONSTRUC-TION

DEPARTMENT HEAD WALK THROUGH

SHOT LIST

READ THROUGHS
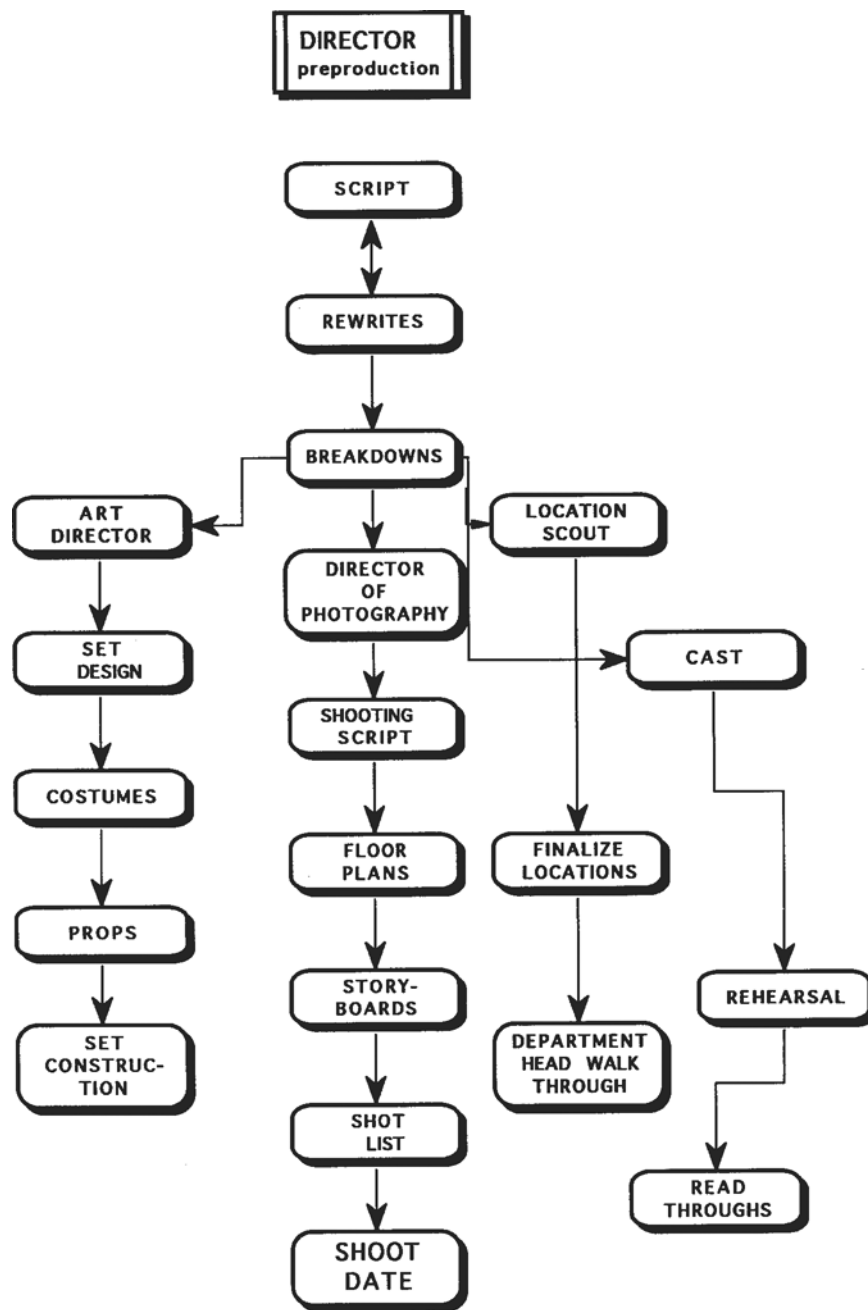
SHOOT DATE

**Figure I.2** Director's preproduction responsibilities.

## PREPARE THOROUGHLY FOR THE SHOOT DATE

Preproduction is the time to research and develop your idea, to design what it should look like, and to explore all the variables such as cast, crew, and locations needed to create a successful production. The more thoroughly a project is planned, the smoother the production will be. *The general rule is: You can't do too much preproduction work.* For some reason, this is a difficult concept for many novices to understand. They often return from their first major shoot dejected, having experienced just how ill prepared they really were. They realize too late that mistakes or disasters during production could have been averted if they had been more organized before they started to shoot. All the talent in the world won't help if your schedule isn't realistic, the meals aren't served on time,

you lose the use of your location, or you don't have enough film stock on hand. These are only a few of the contingencies that require forethought.

One of the major goals of preproduction is to try to anticipate anything and everything that can go wrong during a shoot. This gives you time to react sensibly to things that could not have been anticipated and are entirely beyond your control (and invariably occur, such as unusual weather, acts of God, etc.). These things happen because all film shoots are ruled by Murphy's Law: Anything that can go wrong inevitably will. When you plan a production and work with this assumption, always plan for the worst-case scenario.

> *The best advice I can give is to have a sense of humor about film production. Embrace the Murphy's Law of it all—for everything that can go wrong surely will. But if you expect it, and are prepared for it, you will greet these obstacles with a smile rather than a scream.*
> Jessalyn Haefele, Producer of *Citizen*

> *After two days of shooting, New York got hit with the worst blizzard in 50 years.*
> James Darling

## PREPRODUCTION IS QUALITY TIME

During preproduction, you have an abundance of something you won't have when you start shooting: time—time to consider various ways to shoot a scene, pick the right actor, settle on the right location, or spend on the subtleties of the script. Never lose sight of the fact that this is cost-effective time. All the effort you expend on preparation now will pay off during production. When you're actually shooting, spending time is spending money. Settling on an efficient game plan and solving potential production problems during preproduction will save precious dollars later.

> *I spent a lot of hours in Grand Central, almost an entire day, getting a sense of the building. That was when I first noticed how the light streams through the windows.*
> Adam Davidson

## WITHOUT A GOOD SCRIPT, YOU CANNOT MAKE A GOOD FILM

Even after developing a good screenplay, as discussed in Chapter 1 "Script," there is no guarantee of producing a good film. However, a poorly thought out script has little chance of yielding a successful finished product. You would be ill advised to go out into the field with a story that doesn't live up to its full potential. The investment of time, money, talent, and effort will be wasted unless the original blueprint is solid.

To ensure that you have the best script possible, be prepared to rewrite many times. Don't expect to solve lingering script problems magically during production. Rewriting the script on the set is usually too demanding for beginning filmmakers. The pressures of filming the original script will keep you more than occupied.

It is true that many serendipitous events can occur during shooting and editing that will add evocative imagery, inspired characters, and atmospheric locations to your project. Unexpected surprises in action or dialogue will add measurably to the texture of a scene, but don't count on them. The script will come to full-color life, but the progression of events—your story—will not change. Script problems will then become editing challenges. What is on the page will end up on the screen. Get it right before your start.

## PREPRODUCTION GUIDELINES

Intangible managerial skills are as important as technical know-how in preparing successfully for production. The following are some general guidelines to help with the intangibles of preproduction.

**Keep a Positive Attitude**. Lack of experience makes it difficult for beginning filmmakers to assess their day-to-day preproduction progress. There are so many elements (cast, crew, locations) that have to fall into place that you might sometimes doubt that so many tasks could possibly be accomplished by the shoot date; perhaps you have one part still uncast, there is no sound mixer, and the key location has not yet been secured. Don't panic.

Living with uncertainty is part of the process. Professionals understand that things can come together at the last moment. A positive attitude is as important as efficiency and organization. The producer situates himself at the middle of all the activity and keeps the production team focused. He must inspire confidence that all the elements will come together in time, no matter what the obstacles.

**Allow Enough Time for Preproduction**. How long should it take to prepare a short script for production? Answering this question is difficult because much depends on the experience of the creative team and the complexity of the script. A story set in one room with two characters is easier to preproduce than one demanding 10 different and unique locations. However, any short project can seem overwhelming to the first-time filmmaker.

Aside from the time spent securing the financing, a workable formula is to allow one week of preproduction for each day of principal photography. This step might take less time or more, based on script complexity and the director's experience. In the end, you will do it in the time that is available.

**STUDENTS** | Student shoots range from a few hours to a few days and may have far less time for preproduction than more advanced projects. Although less complex, students still need to properly prepare for the shoot day and follow the basic guidelines.

**Set a Preproduction Schedule**. Use your shoot date as the final target. Create deadlines for securing cast, crew, and locations, and strive to follow them. (See the sample at end of this section.)

**Hold Regular Production Meetings**. Schedule regular production meetings and stick to them. Don't rely on ad hoc gatherings to keep everyone informed. Events happen too fast and plans change too often for everyone to be kept abreast via casual chats. Keep in constant touch with the key creative staff. Learn to work in a nonlinear fashion. It is a juggling game. The production team needs to work on many things at the same time.

Production meetings are opportunities to brainstorm ideas and to solve problems. The key to running an effective production meeting is to be organized and to stick to the agenda. Maximize the time you spend with the crew. Respect all points of view, but don't linger too long on one issue with the whole crew present. Deal with a particularly thorny issue later with only the appropriate crew members. You might have to set up smaller meetings with individual department heads—art, camera, sound, wardrobe, props, hair, and makeup—to deal with specific issues in their respective areas.

Here are some additional suggestions:

- Hold the production meeting at the same time and place each week.
- Have refreshments available.
- Before the meeting, make sure everyone has a copy of the script.

- Set a time limit for the meeting.
- Publish and hand out a written agenda if possible.
- Moderate the meeting, keeping everyone focused on one topic at a time.
- Deal with one department at a time.
- At the end of the meeting, summarize the points of agreement.
- Assign tasks to appropriate crew members.
- Set an agenda for the next meeting.
- Distribute follow-up notes of decisions made (via email).

Email and text messaging are efficient ways of communicating with cast and crew. Alerting them about a change of time or venue of your next production meeting can be handled in seconds. In addition, Cloud-based systems such as Google and Dropbox can also be utilized for crew members to communicate and collaborate remotely.

**Delegate Responsibility**. Preproduction responsibilities fall on many shoulders. The producer must assign tasks to the whole creative team (art director, director, director of photography) and then keep track of each person's progress.

**Never Assume Anything**. Double- and triple-check everything. If the producer assumes that the location manager has checked the electric supply of an apartment location, chances are only 50–50 that he did. Do you want to take that chance?

**Remember that All Things Change**. The process of preproduction is an evolution. The script, schedule, and budget will go through many changes before they are finalized, sometimes right up to the shooting date. The essential caveat is that once shooting begins, changes cease and you must concentrate on fulfilling the script, schedule, and budget.

**Stay Healthy**. Putting together all the ingredients needed to create a film or video can be exciting but stressful, especially if you're doing this for the first time. The daily stress makes demands on the body. You want to be healthy when you are in production. This means taking care of yourself during preproduction and staying at your peak. You cannot slow down production because of a cold or postpone it because of the flu.

## INTERNET ACCESS

If you have established a web site for the project, it can be used to communicate with the crew about

upcoming production meetings. Preproduction blogs can keep everyone abreast of the progress report of the film. It can be tempting to use these tools instead of meeting in person, but there is still nothing more effective that brainstorming ideas around a table.

The weekly production meeting is an effective way of keeping track of everyone's progress. Students and beginners have trouble delegating responsibility once they graduate into larger and more complex productions. So used to doing it all by themselves, they have a hard time letting go. A weekly production meeting keeps everyone honest and accountable and helps the beginner expand the circle of trust necessary to execute more ambitious stories and function on a professional level.

## SAMPLE PREPRODUCTION SCHEDULE

To give you an idea of what the flow of activity looks like from week to week, this section includes a sample preproduction timeline for a 12-page script. It is difficult to predict how your project will fit into this model because each project has its own set of challenges. Your project might require devoting more effort to cast, location, or crew. The challenge of *Memory Lane*, for example, was to find a 10-year-old boy to play the lead, an actor for the guru bowler, and a forest setting within an hour's drive of the city. *Crazy Glue* required months of building the puppets and sets. The producer of *The Lunch Date* needed to secure Grand Central Station and a luncheonette. Jan Krawitz had to find suitable women to interview for *Mirror Mirror* to bring the issue alive. Luke Matheny needed myriad locations and a lot of extras. Finally, James Darling needed to find a gated U.S./Canada border crossing for *Citizen* that would look believable.

The sample schedule assumes six shooting days. At two pages a day, this is a reasonable schedule for a student or beginning filmmaker. Our formula for a beginner allows one week of preproduction for each day of principal photography. This gives you six weeks to prepare for the shoot. Depending on the experience of you and your crew and on the complexity of the script, the preproduction period might be longer or shorter. This prototype will at least give you an idea of what must happen before the cameras can roll. The order and the time during which each task occurs will vary from production to production.

The following schedule assumes you have the following:

- A finished script
- A director
- Adequate financing
- A preliminary budget
- A shoot date

## Week 1

| Producer | Director |
|---|---|
| Sets up office/furniture | Finalizes shooting script |
| Buys supplies | Scouts locations |
| Sets up phone/answering machine | Discusses script with art director |
| Leases photocopier | |
| Buys or leases computer | |
| Creates filing system to keep copies of all agreements | |
| Establishes company name (DBA, "doing business as") | |
| Buys cards/stationery | |
| Opens bank account | |
| Advertises for actors | |
| Advertises for crew | |
| Breaks down script | |
| Creates stripboard and schedule | |
| Submits script to insurance company for estimate | |

Crew
Production manager
Location manager
Art director
Casting director
Production coordinator
Production Meeting 1—Key Points

- Introduce all crew members
- Set up preproduction schedule
- Set goals for next meeting

## Week 2

| Producer | Director |
|---|---|
| Reviews budget | Scouts locations |
| Reviews shooting schedule | Art director presents her ideas for the project |
| Collects, organizes head plans, idea shots | Reviews head shots for actors |
| Signs SAG-AFTRA waiver or guild contract | Analyzes script |
| Sets up auditions | Discusses script with director of photography (DP) |
| Reviews proposed insurance package | |

Orders all necessary forms (location agreements, release forms, call sheets, petty cash envelopes, etc.)
Crew
Director of photography
Office production assistants
Production Meeting 2—Key Points

- Discuss art director's plans
- Request art budget
- Go over preliminary schedule and budget

## Week 3

| Producer | Director |
|---|---|
| Sets up auditions | Reviews location pictures |
| Looks for postproduction facilities | Visits locations with DP |
| Advertises for editor | Holds auditions |
| Settles on insurance package | |
| Negotiates with laboratory for overall package | |
| Researches equipment houses, vendors | |
| Crew | |
| DP (starts lighting designs) | |
| Wardrobe | |
| Props | |
| Special effects (if needed) | |
| Production Meeting 3—Key Points | |

- Approve art department budget
- Narrow down location choices
- Approve construction schedule (if appropriate)

## Week 4

| Producer | Director |
|---|---|
| Sets up more auditions | Holds callbacks |
| Finalizes locations | Finalizes locations |
| Forms crew | Develops visual plan |
| Reviews shooting schedule, budget | Reviews wardrobe, props with art department |
| Sets up dailies, projection schedule | Reviews lighting plan with DP |
| Negotiates agreement with caterer (meal plan) | |
| Makes transportation plans | |
| Rents vans, recreational vehicles | |
| Sets up account with lab, sound transfers | |
| Crew | |
| Assistant director | |
| Makeup/hair | |

Transportation coordinator
Production Meeting 4—Key Points

- Discuss casting alternatives
- Settle on final crew needs
- Finalize transportation plan

## Week 5

| Producer | Director |
|---|---|
| Finalizes cast | Begins rehearsals |
| Negotiates cast contracts | Finalizes shot list |
| Secures location contracts | Reviews script |
| Finalizes crew, crew deal memos | Reviews makeup, hair designs with art department |
| Publishes cast, crew contact sheet | Finalizes lighting plan with DP |
| Secures parking permits | |
| Secures shooting permits | |
| Makes security arrangements | |
| Approves expendables request for all departments | |
| Orders complete equipment package (camera, grip, electric, sound, dolly, generator, walkie-talkies, etc.) | |
| Orders first-aid kit for set | |
| Sets up tentative postproduction schedule | |
| Crew | |
| Key grip | |
| Production sound mixer | |
| 2nd assistant director | |
| Production Meeting 5—Key Points | |

- Discuss wardrobe, props, hair, and makeup issues
- Discuss budget considerations
- Have script timed

## Week 6

| Producer | Director |
|---|---|
| Checks weather report | Holds rehearsals |
| Finalizes budget | Supervises script changes |
| Distributes contact sheet | Visits set construction |
| Finalizes schedule | Finalizes shooting script |
| Reconfirms locations | Does final location scout |
| Confirms crew | Performs walkthrough with department heads |
| Distributes one-liner schedule to cast, crew | |

Distributes call sheets for first-day cast, crew
Distributes maps of locations
Purchases film, tape stock
Orders expendables
Obtains certificates of insurance for locations, equipment, vehicles
Crew
Gaffer
Boom
2nd assistant director
Production Meeting 6—Key Points

- Go over shooting schedule, day by day, with all department heads
- Give general pep talk

## Week 7

**Producer**                    **Director**
Picks up equipment,
   transportation
SHOOT DATE

# Chapter one

# Script

*The script is everything.*
Jim Taylor

It all starts with an idea. For that idea to become a film, it must be fleshed out and developed into a script or screenplay. The script represents the vision of the filmmaker in practical form. It is also your guide through production. From it, you know the story, the characters, the locations, the approximate budget, the final length, and your target audience. With a script, you can finance the production and attract the creative team that will transform the script into a final product. The first member of that team is the director. Her job is to bring a personal vision to the material by either rewriting the script herself or collaborating with the writer until the script best suits a production based on her design.

This is the model we are following in this book. There are other scenarios as well. The director and producer can develop an idea with a writer, or a director/writer can develop the idea and bring on a producer (most film school situations). In the latter case, the producer serves as more of a production manager than a creative force. This scenario can lead to certain complications. For example, even if the director is a good writer, the process may reach a point when the producer feels that the script needs a fresh set of eyes. Negotiating this and other issues can be sticky unless the director is able to put her ego aside and focus on what is best for the project.

We believe that a productive synergy develops through checks and balances. The give-and-take over all creative and financial decisions from script to screen is not only healthy, but essential in creating the best film from the material. Keep this in mind. However, whatever approach is taken, there is one fact that cannot be disputed—without a well-crafted script, you cannot have a good film.

This chapter introduces you to some necessary guidelines for writing a short film script. It does not, however, explore in depth the nuts and bolts of writing technique. We recommend that you consult books written specifically about screenwriting for the short form. You'll find suggestions in the Bibliography.

The guidelines in this chapter are not absolutes. Violating some of these narrative principles should not keep you from moving ahead if you feel strongly about the idea. You will be living with this project for quite a while, so it is important that you feel passionate about the material and its message. Remember, though, that film and video are art forms that communicate via visual images. If the script cannot convey a message visually, it might not engage an audience.

## THE CREATIVE PRODUCER

### Developing the Script

The first step in producing a short film is securing a script. There are many ways you can do this:

- You can write one yourself.
- You can develop an original idea with a writer or director.
- You can adapt a script from another genre (a play or short story) or true story.
- You can find a script that is already written.

The producer supervises the development of an idea until a director is brought on board to supervise the rewrites and prepare the script for production. What starts out as a simple notion might go through many evolutions before it is ready to go before the camera. The goal is to end up with the best script possible from your original idea. No magic on the set will correct any unresolved story or structure problems. The old axiom holds true: if it isn't on the page, it won't

**9**

be on the screen. Be prepared to work and rework the material.

Producing a documentary script involves a different process than generating a narrative text. The specific nature of developing a documentary idea is addressed later in this chapter. There may be those who wish to develop an experimental or avant-garde short. "Experimental" is not even considered a specific genre because the range of ideas for experimental projects is so enormous—from abstract images to installations to nontraditional narratives (see Appendix E for more information of genres).

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Student Academy Awards has a specific category named "Alternative." If you want to understand what "alternative" can represent, it's best to review past winners of this award. Compilations of student Academy Awards are now available on DVD. We will reference a number of filmmakers and films to view to sample a little of what can be done. (Appendix D on short films includes a list of important experimental films and filmmakers.)

Whatever the genre, it is important to be able to create a written representation of your idea, the script. Writing a good short script is difficult. The most common mistake novices make is trying to explore complicated or grandiose ideas that are more suited for the feature film format. They want to say it all in 10 minutes. The short film idea doesn't have the time to explore more than one topic. It needs to be focused and specific. Simple is best. The six examples provided in this book are good scripts because they are simple stories told well. (See Appendix A for the script sample of *Memory Lane* and the web site for scripts of the other films.)

> *Probably the biggest influence—besides all the films I'd ever seen in my life—was looking at student films, what was working and what wasn't. One thing that I thought wasn't working was that the stories went all over the place and that there was an emphasis on the technical rather than substance.*
>
> Adam Davidson

## ANIMATION

Live action usually starts with a script and then a breakdown, which is often followed by storyboarding. An animator will often start with concept sketches and a short treatment followed by an elaborate storyboarding process. Live action boards often block out the basic shots in a scene. Animation boards frequently show every "beat" of the scene. There can be a new beat with every change in emotion or significant character movement. For animation, specific production notes often accompany the boards. Animators often use the boards and sketches as guides to build a rough animation known as an animatic. The animatic can have crude details and unrefined movement. It is meant to resolve issues of blocking, composition, and, most important, timing. Because CG (computer graphics)character modeling and setup take such a long time, studios often produce the animatic while primary modeling is still under way.

## DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Before embarking on a production, see and study as many shorts as possible to get a feel for the form and what can be accomplished in its time frame. The length for shorts varies from 2 minutes (*Bambi Meets Godzilla*, United States, 1969) to 34 minutes (*The Red Balloon*, France, 1956). Novices often struggle to develop stories for shorts because they are not familiar enough with the kinds of ideas that translate well into smaller packages. Shorts and features have dramatic principles in common, but in the same way that short stories are different from novels, there are specific limits to the dramatic scope and range of stories. A character can fall in and out of love, discover the meaning of life, or conquer a nation in two hours. In 10 minutes, a character may only be able to summon up the courage to ask someone for a date.

Because television offers very little product in the short form other than half-hour sitcoms, commercials, or music videos, it doesn't come as a surprise that many ideas developed by first-time filmmakers are better suited for the screen. It may seem that the short form is limiting in its creative and/or thematic possibilities, but after you have studied many short films and videos, it should become apparent that ideas expressed in this form are limited only by the imagination. All the short films selected for this book touch on serious issues and themes.

Finding and viewing short films is much easier now than ever before. Students and beginners have access to YouTube, Vimeo, iTunes, Facebook, and the massive amount of product on the behemoth called the Internet. Anyone with an audience of one can post something on YouTube. The challenge is to sift through it all to separate the wheat from the chaff. Appendix D has been expanded to include links to web sites for shorts as well as excellent short film collections. It also contains recommendations for classic shorts of all genres and how to find them. In addition, the web site for

this book has been updated to include recommendations for what we consider excellent examples.

> *I think that I had seen a couple of films on eating disorders, and I had a feeling that I knew what was out there. I did seek out one film on beauty pageants, which was pretty irrelevant to this subject matter. But I do think that's important. I didn't want to make a film like this if there was a film that had just come out a year earlier. I did enough of a search to convince myself that there was really not one that took this particular perspective.*
>
> Jan Krawitz

Make sure to explore the range of genres—comedy, farce, drama, tragedy, or melodrama—to learn what is best suited to the short film. Comedies, for example, lend themselves to the short form more comfortably than melodrama (film noir, Western, murder mysteries, sci-fi), which usually requires the development of a more complex plot.

Many of the great filmmakers were influenced by existing material. Orson Welles saw and studied John Ford's famous Western *Stagecoach* more than 50 times while preparing to shoot *Citizen Kane*.

> *AMC would just show like old movies all the time, and that was how I really got into the classics, especially the old studio comedies, like* The Thin Man *or* Philadelphia Story *or* His Girl Friday. *Those films struck a chord.*
>
> Luke Matheny

## WHAT IS A SCRIPT?

A script is to filmmaking as a blueprint is to shipbuilding or as a score is to a symphony performance. Imagine the ensuing difficulties of a shipbuilder who begins construction on a boat with only a few sketches to work from, or the cacophony of a full orchestra trying to play a concert from a sketchy musical score. Just as the drawings tell the shipbuilder exactly where to place the mast and the notes on the score tell the musicians what and when and how loudly to play, so a script dictates how each member of the production team is to go about fulfilling his or her job.

A script depicts the moment-to-moment progression of events by indicating what the audience will see and hear. Unlike a novel or a poem, the script is an unfinished work; it is only a part of the media-making process. It has no inherent literary value other than as a guide from which a film is wrought.

## What Does a Script Look Like?

The script of *Memory Lane* in Appendix A is presented in Writers Guild of America (WGA) standard screenplay format. This format is an industry convention that has a direct relationship to how the script is photographed. (See Chapter 3 "Breakdowns" for more about screenplay format.) Writing a script in proper format has become simplified with the availability of software systems. Some of the current scriptwriting programs are Final Draft, Movie Magic Screenwriter, and Celtx (which is a free download—both Movie Magic and Celtx link to a scheduling and budgeting software). Most can format your script as you type it and include every genre, including TV. They can be found where computer programs are sold, and some companies will send you a free demo disk.

However, a story doesn't have to be presented originally in screenplay format to make dramatic sense. You can work from a **step outline** or a **treatment**. A step outline is, as the term implies, the story told in steps or **story beats** of one or two sentences describing the action and the dramatic tension in each scene. A treatment, similar to a **synopsis**, is the bare bones of a story told in narrative prose rather than in descriptions of individual scenes. (See synopsis of *The Lunch Date* in Chapter 2 "Financing.") A treatment reads like a short story and can be as straightforward as the way the case studies are described later in this chapter. A step outline also represents the bare bones of the story, but is not concerned with dialogue, details, set dressing, or minor characters, just the action of the scene, who does what to whom. Whatever method you use, it is imperative that the idea eventually conforms to the standard script format.

A common format for documentary scriptwriting is a two-column page: one side lists the visuals, and the other side lists the audio. The reader will get an idea of the show by imagining these two elements together. However, unlike the script in a narrative production, this is a form that evolves after much of the footage has already been shot. Documentarians learn to be especially responsive to their material. By the time the documentary gels, the story might have changed, taking a direction very different from the original outline.

For example, in Errol Morris's Academy Award-winning documentary *The Thin Blue Line* (USA, 1988), his original intent was to interview inmates on death row in Texas. In the course of conducting the interviews, he met and interviewed a man who was to become the sole subject of his film. Believing the man on death row to be innocent, Morris took his case to the film audience. The argument was so compelling the man was retried and eventually freed from prison. This

example demonstrates not only the adjustments documentary filmmakers undergo in the discovery process of their topic, but also the power of cinema to make a change, to affect the world.

> *During the interview with my first subject, I asked way too many questions. After shooting 800 feet on that single interview, I reduced the number of questions from eight to four and really simplified the content. Because, despite a "test" interview, I had overestimated how much information I could cover in a 400-foot (11-minute) roll of film.*
>
> Jan Krawitz

## Where Do Scripts Come From?

Scripts are developed from whatever might inspire you to express and communicate something in visual and dramatic terms. All the following sources can serve as the basis for a dramatic or documentary project:

| | |
|---|---|
| Ideas | Dreams |
| Images | Real events |
| Characters | Fantasies |
| Concepts | Memories |
| Historical events | Real-life experiences |
| Places | Social issues |
| Adaptations from short stories | News stories |
| Magazine articles | |

You might be inspired by a single event that occurred on a bus or train, an interaction between two people that strikes you as funny or poignant, an uncle who told you wonderful stories as a child, or a favorite teacher who was a memorable character. You might have a compelling need to express something about the social conditions in your neighborhood. The best scripts are written from the heart. They are based on subjects the writer knows on a first-hand basis.

*Memory Lane* focuses on conquering fears of the unknown—the woods, growing up. Most of us can empathize with the boy's transcendental moment when his perception of himself in the world undergoes a major shift, a spurt of personal growth.

> Memory Lane *is an example of a "what if?" situation. I was thinking, what if a kid spends a night in the woods alone. It's a scouting thing. The "Order of the Arrow." Right? Like Outward Bound. Anyway, I was thinking about that, and then that seemed boring, so I just was letting my mind wander about, asking "What if this happened? What if that happened?" And at one point I said, "What if he found a bowling ball?" And I started to just build from that. There's not a lot of research one can do about bowling in the woods. But it did sort of beg the question of Rip van Winkle, so I researched that story, because I wanted to give it a fairy tale kind of feeling.*
>
> Jim Taylor



**Figure 1.1** A magical moment from *Memory Lane*.

**Figure 1.2** A scene from *Citizen*.

The woman in *The Lunch Date* also has a personal revelation. She and a homeless man share an unusual moment together, and then she escapes back to the suburbs. This moment probably does not have the same impact on her life as the events in *The Lunch Date* do on the boy because she is older. We see her experience the unexpected, which then affords her the ability to know the homeless in a new way. Both characters are changed in some way by the events of their stories.

*I remember that several years before, I had heard a story similar to the one I used in the film, which was a story about a person misidentifying something of someone else's as belonging to themselves. And I thought this was a pretty human mistake that anybody could make and that I had probably made somewhere along the line—assuming something about somebody else. So I played with the idea of setting this story in New York and having the two most opposite people I could think of meet.*

Adam Davidson

*Citizen* tells the story of a young man in the not-too-distant future who tries to escape from his homeland in the dead of winter (see Figure 1.2). As this teenage boy is chased by hunters through the harsh wilderness approaching the Canadian border, he is haunted by a fateful doctor's visit and the perilous choice he has made.

*I read about these deserters from the U.S. Military that were seeking sanctuary in Canada. From my own family history—I am estranged from my father, but he did go to Vietnam, I was aware of the Vietnam era draft dodging community. I also spent my life*

*crossing the U.S./Canada border visiting my extended family in Arkansas and Texas. Around those ideas I started thinking about what might happen if this trend continues, if the wars that America are waging are escalated just a little further so that people were calling for a military draft. Small advocacy groups—more on the anti-war side would not be fighting this war if everyone was at risk.*

James Darling

*God of Love* tells the story of a lounge singing dart thrower who, desperately in love with the drummer at his club, is given a gift of magic darts that have the power to have someone fall in love for six hours (see Figure 1.3).

*At some point, I had the idea to do a story based on Cupid. I thought of Cupid a little more literally, about how he's actually shooting arrows at people. And when you think about that, that's such a violent act. It's not love. But I thought there was maybe some comedic potential in that. The first premise of "God of Love" was very different, and the conceit was that Cupid already existed and that he had been abusing his powers and using his arrows to score women for himself.*

*And then a friend of mine, said, "Why don't you make a story about a man who becomes Cupid?" And that was a really excellent note because you could see how that would really work as a short. And then it was just about developing these kind of scenarios that would have a surprising but inevitable end that he became Cupid. I liked the idea of being a lounge singer, so I cooked up this sort of nonsensical job that he does a weird act where he throws darts and sings at that same time. Because I wanted to have him using*

**Figure 1.3** Characters in *God of Love*.

*the silly job that, while it was of some value, it wasn't what you wanted to happen to the character long term. You got the idea that there was something more he could be doing with his life, because you know the story has to end with him becoming Cupid.*

Luke Matheny

The film *Mirror Mirror* focuses on the topic of how women perceive their bodies. The filmmaker had a specific theme to explore and set about devising a situation that would allow women to express their innermost thoughts (see Figure 1.4).



**Figure 1.4** A masked woman surrounded by mannequins from *Mirror Mirror*.

*I believe that this self-deprecation and striving for an unattainable body type is a generalized experience among a lot of women. All you have to do is eavesdrop in department store dressing rooms or women's locker rooms to hear the laments that women have about their bodies.*

Jan Krawitz

*Crazy Glue* is an animated clay puppet short adapted from a story by Israeli author Etgar Keret. This **claymation** film tells the story of one innovative attempt to patch up a disintegrating marriage—through the use of Crazy Glue!

Whereas *Memory Lane, The Lunch Date, God of Love, Citizen*, and *Mirror Mirror* are original ideas, *Crazy Glue* is an adaptation. Writer Etgar Keret is one of the leading voices in Israeli literature and cinema. Since the late 1990s, he has published three books of short stories and novellas, two comic books, two feature screenplays, and numerous teleplays. His stories have been published in 15 different languages and have gained both critical acclaim and success with the public. His book *Missing Kissinger* was named one of the 50 most important books written in Hebrew.

*As a going away gift when I left Israel I received a short book by Etgar Keret, the writer with whom I now work. I finished it on the plane. It was about 50 short stories of his. I thought every single one of them should have been a short film. In fact, I think since they do lend themselves so well, more than a hundred of his stories were adapted to short films at this point. I adapted quite a few of them through many different classes at NYU, and when it came time to have my senior thesis project made, that story "Crazy Glue" was just so beautiful. I thought it was the most beautiful short story I ever read. It also had a lot of magical realist sensibilities to it. I thought it was very appropriate for stop motion animation.*

Tatia Rosenthal

## How Are Scripts Developed?

You should always be on the lookout for interesting material. Turn your eyes and ears outward to the world around you and write down the events that you observe in your quest for a good idea or story in a notebook or diary. If you use a computer, you can file incidents in a database under a variety of tags. Moments in life happen at breakneck speed. You might think at the time that you will remember them when you go home at night, but chances are you will have forgotten some significant detail that struck you as funny or compelling.

One result of typing and storing material is that you remember it better. Good ideas beget good ideas. The events you write down will stimulate your imagination further. Your writer's notebook could contain the following categories:

**Characters**: Short films are mostly character based, so keep detailed notes of people who could be the basis of a story. We have all met people who in one way or another fascinate us. These could be ones you know very well or not at all. It could be what they do, how they do it, or what they know that interests you. Interesting people you see on a train or plane or meet at a party. Note how they look and dress and any unique behavior or mannerisms. Human actions form the core of drama, so people are the most obvious starting point for a writer.

**Locations**: Places create mood. Be on the lookout for visually interesting spaces that serve as compelling backdrops for dramatic encounters. Because certain behavior tends to occur in specific places, locations can serve as inspirations for story ideas.

**Objects**: Curious or evocative objects. They could be interesting pieces of clothing, objects found around the house, key chains. Objects in films can take on a significance based on the circumstance in which they are placed.

**Situations**: Revealing or telling situations that you witness or experience firsthand.

**Unusual or Revealing Acts**: Witnessing people act or behave in a way that reveals something powerful and unique about their character.

**A News File**: Save good stories in a folder that could serve as an inspiration for a documentary or narrative idea. Look at old magazines and newspapers that have items that are noncurrent material that no one else is using.

**Picture File**: Collect pictures from magazines, newspapers, and the Internet. Inspiration can come from dramatic pictures from war, crime situations, fashion images, or any images that stimulate your imagination. People say a "picture is worth a thousand words." Be on the lookout for those telling ones.

**Dream/Fantasy Journal**: Your dreams and fantasies are a sure indicator of your underlying concerns. Keep a notebook by your bed and write down each dream while you remember it. This part of your journal is for you to let your mind take off in any direction it wants, stimulated, we hope, by the collection of material you collect.

**Themes**: Themes grow out of who you are and what you believe. They are the heart and soul of good stories. Write down themes that intrigue you or you feel deeply about. When you see a film or read a story that speaks to your own sensibilities, make a note of it.

> Casablanca *inspired me. There was sort of an unrequited love sacrifice by the end, which I found very moving and very effective in a short film, especially when it's a little bit of a surprise. A love triangle where the protagonist has to sacrifice himself at the end to get out of the way of this other relationship. But then he would be, in essence, choosing duty over love.*
>
> Luke Matheny

## WORKSHOP YOUR IDEA

All the information you collect can be transformed into many different scenarios. Mix and match the various characters, evocative situations, and locations in your journal. Look for unlikely relationships. A constructive way to deal with this accumulation of ideas and material is to "workshop them" with interested people. Ideas that are spoken out loud have a different impact than those that are read. They can either sound better than you thought or fall flat. Not only can you test an idea or concept on an ad hoc audience, but, more important, these verbalized ideas will be stimulating. A thought or image conjures up different impressions in each person's mind. If one of these ideas becomes the core of your final script, these brainstorming sessions will serve as a bond and the start of a long and fruitful collaboration that will, it is hoped, continue throughout the entire process.

> There was a phase in the middle of writing the script where I went off and tried to make it a little bit of a self-reflecting piece where the husband was going to go to work, and at work he's a three-dimensional animated character. So he goes to work, goes to the computer, and his job is to move inside a computer. It was quite amusing, but technically it would have made the script much much harder to produce. I ended up taking all of that out and going back to the original story as it was. The only one reference I left in there was when the woman is having an argument with her husband. She is doodling inside of a cookbook, and what she has done is made a flipbook inside the cookbook. That was the little leftover of that idea.
>
> Tatia Rosenthal

During the workshop phase of development, it might be necessary to develop many ideas before you discover one that reflects your own voice and that also suits the short form. There is no easy or quick path; there is only a process that if pursued on a regular basis will ultimately result in a story that you believe in and want to tell.

> *The big thing I was struggling with is; how did I feel about the character? I was definitely putting myself in the character's shoes. What would I do in this situation? Ultimately, I decided that I did not want the film to necessarily take a point of view on the character. I wanted to inspire conversation afterwards. It was that idea that eventually got me to the concept: what if you really do not know what is going on until very near or close to the end of the film. That is when I had one of my early writing teachers at NYU give me one note. It is a* Twilight Zone *episode. It is perfect. I was like—okay.*
>
> James Darling

## BASIC GUIDELINES FOR THE SHORT FORM

How do you evaluate an idea for a script? Short films can be developed from many different kinds of ideas. However, there are limits to what can be accomplished in the short form. Because most beginners are not familiar with its format, let's examine these common attributes and furnish a critical point of view. The following are general guidelines; there will always be exceptions.

Let's examine what *Citizen*, *Crazy Glue*, *God of Love*, *Memory Lane*, *Mirror Mirror*, *The Lunch Date*, and a few classic shorts have in common. This will give you a greater understanding of the dramatic parameters of the short form. Make sure to use these guidelines when you watch and critique other short works.

The screenwriting process is about research, discovery, and crystallization. Watching your story develop is an exciting experience. The final result should feel as if each scene is in the right place.

Achieving this feeling, however, comes from patience and hard work. You will soon understand the age-old rule: writing is rewriting. Subscribe to it. Be satisfied only with the best you can do.

## Length

Is there an ideal length for a short? (The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' length requirement for a short is up to 40 minutes.) The best length is the one that satisfies your particular story. Work from this point. If you are concerned about the ideal length for distribution markets, submit your proposal or script to several distributors for feedback. If you have already found a market for your picture, the ideal length might be predetermined.

Look at the length of films at well-known festivals. What is the average time? Films in the 10-minute range usually have a better chance of festival acceptance because festival organizers like to program as many as possible. YouTube shorts are even shorter. At the end of the day, your film is as long as it needs to be to tell the story.

*I think the defining characteristic of a short film is the length. Think about it. You sit down to a feature-length film; you just know you're going sit there for around ninety or a hundred minutes. Whereas a short film, when you sit down to watch it, you don't really know how long it's going be. So I think you need to announce your intentions clearly right at the outset, so you can imply a structure, so people sort of know where they are. I think that's why a lot of shorts feel so long, because you just don't know. I'm now on the Live Action Short Committee for the Oscars. We have to watch so many and they just all seem interminable.*

Luke Matheny

## The Central Theme

The central theme is what the story is all about. It is the raison d'être, the cement that holds the story together. Themes are concerned with universal concepts—love, honor, identity, compromise, responsibility, ambition, greed, and guilt—that are experienced and shared worldwide. The universal quality of these ideas and emotions helps ensure that the audience will relate to the material on a deeper level than the plot. Without this unifying ingredient, there is no purpose or meaning to the work.

The theme represents the reason why you want to make the film in the first place: to say something about the human condition. In *Memory Lane*, the theme is conquering a fear. *The Lunch Date* is about letting go of one's prejudice. *Crazy Glue* is an intimate story about a lonely wife's attempt to draw back her philandering husband. *Mirror Mirror* centers on how women see themselves juxtaposed with society's mirror. *God of Love* explores the age-old question of why people fall in love. One person can make a difference in your life. All the scenes in your film should be subordinate to the main theme. If a scene doesn't support your theme, eliminate it.

*That is what it has always been about for me, the communication of ideas and stories: The desire to express oneself. What has really happened in the last few years with the web, with YouTube, with a lot of traditional media going onto the web, but also with amateur user generated content, filmmaking has become the new writing. There is writing that is published in a novel form, but there is the writing we do everyday between each other. Filmmaking, whether it is video conferencing, recording personal greetings; it has become ubiquitous in everything. So the big challenge that I and my peers seem to be facing is where does art begin? If everyone can do this—at different levels certainly—but what is culture vs. what is communication? It is a big question.*

James Darling

## Conflict

A basic element common to all visual drama is the need for a specific and identifiable conflict. Conflict creates tension. Tension engages the viewer's emotions, it keeps them engaged, until the conflict is resolved and the tension is relieved at the end of the piece.

What is conflict, and how is it created? Conflict is realized through characters. Someone wants something or is unhappy or unfulfilled in some way, takes action, and meets with conflict. Most narrative stories begin by establishing a problem, dilemma, or goal. The process of working out this issue defines the drama. Obstacles to solving the problem intensify the conflict. The necessity of overcoming obstacles to resolve the conflict places a greater value on the lesson learned.

*The Law of Conflict: Nothing moves forward in a story except through conflict. . . . As long as conflict engages our thoughts and emotions we travel through the hours unaware of the voyage. Then suddenly the film's over. We glance at our watches, amazed. But when conflict disappears, so do we. The pictorial interest of eye pleasing photography or the aural pleasures of a beautiful score may hold us briefly, but if conflict is kept on hold for too long, our eyes leave the screen.*

Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*, p. 210

## The Basic Conflicts

Different kinds of conflict are possible in a story, regardless of whether it's fictional or nonfictional:

- Individual versus self (internal)
- Individual versus individual (personal)
- Individual versus society (social environment)
- Individual versus nature (physical environment)

Each one of these conflicts, alone or in combination draws our attention to the plight of the main character, or protagonist, when confronted by personal or another individual's demons, the forces of society, or nature. The filmmaker creates a deep emotional connection between the audience and the protagonist by clearly identifying the protagonist's dilemma.

*Citizen* employs three levels of conflict: individual versus society (the state), individual versus nature (physical environment), and individual versus self (personal). The young man, fleeing from the draft, not only must overcome rough terrain, snow, a formidable wall, and the border patrol to make it to Canada, but also face never seeing his parents again.

The protagonist in *The Lunch Date* faces two levels of conflict: internal and personal. Her goal is to eat her salad. The obstacles are the homeless man (personal) and her prejudices (internal). This is the basis for conflict. How she deals with this unexpected situation creates a tension that will be resolved only when the woman either gets her salad or does not. The tension created by this expectation impels us to watch. We are eager to learn how she will handle this unique situation. Will she overcome her aversion to the homeless man? The transition from outrage to mutual respect is a satisfying leap for the character and the audience.

*Crazy Glue* shows a lonely wife's attempt to draw back her philandering husband through the use of common household glue. This individual versus individual story has a universal appeal.

The conflict in *Mirror Mirror* is one of individual versus nature, society, and self. The goal is for the women to accept their physical appearance. Tension arises from the fact that their looks are at odds with society's standards of beauty. This tension is intensified by the emphasis and importance our culture places on how a woman's body looks.

The conflict in *God of Love* is internal (Ray's love for Kelly) and personal (Ray's desire to win her affections). Raymond's quest for Kelly's love becomes more daunting as she has recently fallen in love with his best friend, Fozzie, the guitarist in the band. Her love for Fozzie now poses an even greater obstacle to Ray's unrequited love.

In each of these stories, the filmmaker sets up an expectation by establishing a conflict. We are engaged by the main character's need to overcome the conflict and deal with the problem, and we will be satisfied only when the conflict is resolved. If the characters could get what they wanted easily, there would be no story.

Equally important, the basic conflict existed even before the story began. The boy in *Memory Lane* was timid, and the woman of *The Lunch Date* had her social prejudices well before the film began. Raymond has been in love with Kelly long before the movie begins. The story setting presents a situation to reveal conflict that already exists. There is no time to develop conflict in a short piece, so conflict should be inevitable.

## The Dramatic Arc or Spine

Every story should have a beginning, middle, and end—but, as Jean-Luc Godard once said, not necessarily in that order. In *Citizen*, *Crazy Glue, God of Love, Memory Lane,* and *The Lunch Date,* each main character has a goal (survival, the salad, the husband, to fulfill a destiny, the border), and each has an obstacle (fear, the homeless man, her husband's indifference, true love, the border patrol).

Most narrative stories can be reduced to this basic formula of goal-obstacle-resolution, creating this progression:

- Beginning (setup)
- Middle (development)
- End (resolution)

This can also be stated in terms of character:

- Someone wants something
- Takes action
- Meets with obstacles (conflict)
- That lead to a climax
- And a resolution

This formula creates the natural arc or spine of all narrative and non-narrative drama. All stories follow this progression. The problem is introduced, developed, and then resolved. When the resolution has been achieved, the story is over.

The story should have some twists and turns along the way (complications) to add tension to its development. Either the characters or situations cause the events of a story. *The Lunch Date* has several unexpected twists along the way. First, the homeless man allows the woman to share his salad; then, he buys

coffee for her; and finally, she discovers that it wasn't her salad after all. In *Crazy Glue*, the use of the key prop, a tube of glue introduced in the first scene, becomes the "bond" that reunites the married couple. *Citizen*, on the other hand, plays with ambiguity of time. It is not clear if the young man had his "physical" for the army before deciding to flee or after. In *God of Love*, our hero may not have been able to bond with the girl of his dreams, but he has discovered an even greater purpose in life, becoming himself, the *God of Love*.

Each of these events defies the dramatic expectation of the story setup. They give each story its originality. The director can map these emotional beats out on a graph so that no matter what scene is being shot, she can understand the dynamics of each moment and its relationship to the whole. This map allows the director to communicate with the creative team out of sequence. For example, knowing what transpires in scene 4 will inform her work with an actor in scene 3. If the actor plays scene 3 too forcefully, he may have nowhere to go emotionally for the climax in scene 4.

Most of these principles hold true for the documentary form. A documentary also needs a dramatic arc by which it can tell a true story.

## One Primary Event

A short film should focus on a single event around which the action of the story revolves. *Crazy Glue, The Lunch Date*, *Memory Lane* and *God of Love* are stories told in a contained time period: in *Crazy Glue*, prying his wife off the ceiling; in *The Lunch Date*, sharing a salad; in *Memory Lane*, bowling his way to the morning; in *God of Love*, using "love darts" to induce the girl of his dreams to fall in love with him.

*Citizen* focuses on creating a relationship between two events: the physical exam and the young man's run for the border. The time frame for the connection is clearly more ambiguous. The event in *Mirror Mirror* is the coming together of many women to express their feelings about their bodies. The single event is an important element in the success of each film. In a short of less than 30 minutes, it is difficult to balance any more.

By focusing on the playing out of just one event, the filmmaker can fully explore the event's dramatic potential. This simplicity of purpose frees her to give depth to the piece. The audience comes away satisfied because their expectations have been fulfilled.

It's not always necessary to work within a confined time period to create a successful story. *Le Poulet* (*The Chicken*), a 15-minute Academy Award-winning

short film written and directed by Claude Berri (B&W, 1963), takes place over a period of days. *Le Poulet* is the story of a young French boy who becomes so fond of a rooster that his parents bought for Sunday dinner that he secretly decides to convince them that it's a hen. He steals an egg from the refrigerator and places it under the rooster. This ploy works until one morning when the rooster wakes up the father with its crowing. Frightened that his parents are now going to kill the bird, the boy pleads for its life. The parents, surprised and touched by the boy's attachment, decide to let him keep the bird as a pet.

The story focuses on a single conflict that arises out of the main character's goal to keep the rooster as a pet. That conflict takes place over a week, not hours. The film is told in small vignettes that underscore the young boy's dilemma and how he attempts to resolve it.

## One Major Character

*The Lunch Date* and *Citizen* are approximately 11 minutes long. *Crazy Glue* is half that length. *Memory Lane* and *God of Love* run for 15 and 18 minutes respectively. This is time enough to focus on only one main character. A dilemma is introduced, expanded, and resolved for the wife in *Crazy Glue*, the woman in *The Lunch Date*, the young man in *Citizen,* the boy in *Memory Lane*, and Raymond Goodfellow in *God of Love.* It's true that the husband in *Crazy Glue*, the homeless man in The *Lunch Date,* the bowler in *Memory Lane*, and Ray's best friend Fozzie as well as all the love birds he has brought together in *God of Love* go through some sort of change, but only in direct relationship to the main character. They serve as the *antagonist*. They force or initiate the conflict by serving as obstacles to the *protagonist'*s goal. Although there can be other characters, our emotions focus on one person's story in each film. We don't care for the other characters in the same way as we care for the main characters.

When a short film is expanded to 30 minutes, it is possible to deal fully with two characters, although

their destinies should be interlocked in some way. An excellent example of a two-character piece is an award-winning short film titled *Minors*, written and directed by Alan Kingsberg (New York University, 1984). This film is the story of a teenage girl who needs a subject for her science project and a minor league pitcher struggling to make it to the majors. The story brings these two people together. The girl, who is a baseball fanatic, convinces the pitcher that if she can teach him to throw a curve ball, he will be called up to play in the majors. She puts the pitcher through a training program, and he eventually develops a terrific curve ball. He is called up to the majors, but she is left without a project. He helps her present their pitching experiment as the science project, and it is a success. She passes her science class, and he pitches for the Yankees.

Even though there are two main characters in *Minors*, their goals intersect. Each wants something different, but the success of one is directly tied to the success of the other. The pitcher makes it to the majors because of the student, and she completes her science project because of him.

> *What I knew from the script was the basic structure of the events that would happen. The important things to me were that the woman would get bumped, lose her wallet, miss her train, and that she'd enter this restaurant. She'd sit down, get up to get a fork, and come back, and the guy would be there. And they would share a salad, and he would get up and get coffee, and come back, and ta da. I had to figure out how I was going to reveal her mistake. That was the framework that I had. Then the lines, the bits of action, and the small details would come out of that.*
>
> Adam Davidson

## Follow-Through

Your main character must be capable of following through with the primary action or story purpose of the film. The conflict cannot be sustained if the character is not relentless in the pursuit of his goal. Aristotle established this dramatic principle in his *Poetics* 2,000 years ago. It is this ability to follow through that keeps the audience engaged and the story alive.

In *God of Love,* Ray is relentless in his pursuit of Kelly until he discovers that his best friend Fozzie is finally reciprocating Kelly's love. The young man in *Citizen* is determined to cross the border. The boy in *Memory Lane* wants to make a strike. Neither does the woman give up in her pursuit of "her salad" in *The Lunch Date*.

Likewise, the antagonist must be a suitable adversary, up to the challenge of the main character. "Unity of opposites" is a common term in dramatic writing. The major characters must be evenly matched for conflict to exist. If the antagonist is even stronger than the protagonist is, the audience will question whether the main character will succeed, and when she does, the victory will be that much more satisfying. In *Citizen*, Mother Nature and the border patrol serve as worthy antagonists.

## Minimum Back Story

What is back story? It is the historical information, or exposition, about the characters that is necessary to understand their motivation during the course of the story. In a short, back story must be communicated quickly and efficiently. A feature film has 30–40 minutes of setup time, but a short has only a few minutes.

The character of the woman in *The Lunch Date* is well defined by her wardrobe, packages, and demeanor. She is a wealthy woman headed back to the suburbs. Her reaction to the street people in Grand Central Station sets up an expectation about how she will react to the man who has "stolen" her lunch. The boy in *Memory Lane* is immediately presented as someone with a fear of the woods. We do not need to know any more about his history to relate to his present situation. A lonely wife in *Crazy Glue* fighting to revive her marriage is someone we can all relate to. The young man in *Citizen* is willing to risk his life to avoid being drafted. In *God of Love*, Ray informs us at the beginning of the film that he has been praying to God for some time for assistance in winning the heart of Kelly Moran. There is no need to know any more about these characters to understand the rest of the film.

If understanding your main character requires the audience to grasp too much information before the story can start, find a clever way to integrate exposition into the body of the story or move on to another idea.

## Internal Motives, External Action

Communicating internal problems is one of the challenges of writing for the screen. This is a visual medium. Dramatic events must be manifested through actions and sounds. The wife in *Crazy Glue* and the woman from *The Lunch Date* expose their internal conflicts through their actions. The wife in *Crazy Glue* sticks by her marriage, literally. In *The Lunch Date*, the

woman's prejudice is revealed when she refuses help from a well-dressed black man. These stories throw their characters into unexpected situations. We *see* who they are by the way they *act*. The boy in *Memory Lane* thinks of himself as weak and hopeless, but given the chance to learn how to bowl, he shows himself and us what his real potential could be if just one person believes in him.

## No Talking Heads

If your story contains a lot of dialogue and very little action or dramatic movement, it might be better as a radio drama or a play. Films are usually about action. The motives of the characters are exposed through their actions. Viewers should be able to watch a film with the sound off and still understand the story. The rule most often quoted is "show, don't tell." *Crazy Glue* has very little dialogue; *The Lunch Date* has little meaningful dialogue. The young man in *Citizen* barely speaks. His actions, willing to risk his life so that he can cross the border to Canada, tell the audience volumes regarding his dedication and commitment.

The dialogue that exists supports the action, defines the characters, and enhances our appreciation of the images. If you are interested in adapting a play, you will need to "open up" the drama by devising actions and movement to replace many of the words and to create a visual component that doesn't exist on the stage. Documentaries should also seek visual action, rather than depending on one interview after another. Visuals should complement the aural narrative.

## Images before Words

The dominant rule about visual storytelling is that if you can show it, don't say it. Many beginners mistakenly think you tell a story with dialogue. A director is aware that on the screen, the actor's face itself becomes part of the dialogue. A well-placed close-up could serve better than a word or phrase; an image usually speaks louder than any word. Dialogue supports the plot movement; it doesn't supersede that movement. Use the words to enhance, not replace, an image.

> *Movies SHOW . . . and then TELL. A true movie is likely to be 60 to 80 percent comprehensible if the dialogue is in a foreign language.*
> Alexander Mackendrick, director and screenwriter, *The Sweet Smell of Success*, *The Man in the White Suit*

Scripts are usually overwritten because writers feel the need to put it all in. It is the director's job to trim the "fat" (unnecessary words or actions). In *The Lunch Date*, the original screenplay called for the woman to be accosted by a homeless person on her way to the train after the salad incident. She was to tell the man, "Get a job!" The scene was shot because it was in the script, but it is not in the final film. In the film, the woman is approached by a homeless man on her way to the train, but she completely ignores him. Why? This physical slight seemed to the director a far more potent gesture than the words "Get a job!" Addressing the man acknowledges that he exists; ignoring him treats him as if he doesn't exist. In the *God of Love,* the most important transition in the film occurs without a word of dialogue. It is when Ray sees that his best friend Fozzie is after all attracted to Kelly, the girl Ray has pined for for years. This crucial turning point results in Ray embracing his destiny, his role as the *God of Love*!

## ADAPTATION

The beginning filmmaker may also look for ideas for a short project from preexisting material. In our list of where scripts come from, we cite short stories, real-life experiences, news stories, historical events, real events, and magazine articles.

The history of motion pictures has been dominated by adaptations, mostly from novels. At the height of the studio period in the 1930s, Hollywood was turning out more than 600 films a year. To supply this pipeline of production, studios looked to material that had already proven itself in the marketplace. Novels served this purpose. Although the studios in the United States produce nowhere near that number of films a year now, roughly half are adapted from another medium, usually from a novel or play.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences honors the craft of adaptation; a separate Oscar is given to best adaptation in addition to best original screenplay. Yet there are few books devoted to adaptation and only a handful that reserve a substantial section for this craft. Most how-to writing manuals focus on creating original stories. Although all the important lessons about dramatic writing apply, the ability to transpose a well-written short story (or even a real-life incident) into a film script requires a specific discipline.

## Why Adapt?

One obvious reason to adapt is that you have already found a story that has inspired you to produce it as a