

SERIES

TEACHING FILM AND MEDIA STUDIES

# Teaching Scriptwriting, Screenplays and Storyboards for Film and TV Production

Mark Readman



Education



Series Editor: Vivienne Clark

# Screenplay format

On the page of the screenplay attached, use arrows or brackets to indicate the position of the following:

- Scene
- Slug line
- Scene direction
- Character cue
- Actor direction
- Dialogue

## ● Key terms in screenwriting

**Scene:** screenplays are divided into scenes. (This is a technical definition, rather than the dramatic definition Robert McKee describes in *Story* which he also calls a 'story event'.) A scene can be defined as a unit of dramatic action which takes place in a specific location in continuous time.

**Slug line** or scene heading, eg EXT. MARTHA'S HOUSE. NIGHT: This tells us whether the scene is inside or outside, where it is and whether it's day or night. If more information about the location is needed it can go from the general to the specific or vice versa, eg INT. JACK'S CAR. HIGH STREET. DAY.

**Scene direction:** always written in the present tense, this contains descriptions of the characters' actions and events relevant to the story. Characters' names are usually capitalised, eg

JACK notices MARTHA standing at the side of the road. He slams the brakes on and the car screeches to a halt.

**Character cue:** the name of the character who speaks. Always capitalised and centred above their speech.

**Actor direction:** in brackets under the character's name, used to describe the way, or to whom, they speak. Mostly redundant, and disliked by actors, but can be useful if the manner of speaking contradicts what appears to be the meaning or if there is potential uncertainty about who is being addressed.

**Dialogue:** what the characters say.

Camera shots and angles should not appear in the screenplay (although some writer/directors writing for themselves will include them).

INT. SAMMY'S ROOM. DAY

ALAN enters surreptitiously. He hunts through the papers and magazines on the desk.

ALAN  
(under his breath)  
Now where have you put it?

INT. ZELNER'S OFFICE. DAY

ZELNER is reading. Occasionally he looks up and SAMMY meets his gaze nervously.

ZELNER  
I can't believe you've  
brought this to me.

EXT. MOTORWAY. DAY

ALAN'S car speeds erratically through heavy traffic. Gradually the lanes seize up.

INT. ALAN'S CAR. DAY

ALAN  
Come on! Come on!

INT. ZELNER'S OFFICE. DAY

SAMMY shifts nervously in his chair. A bead of sweat forms and runs down his cheek.

ZELNER  
This is...terrific. It's the  
best thing you've ever done.

# Screenplay format

In small groups:

- 1 Read the following short story.

**A** girl and her father were driving along a country road on their way home when they saw a young girl hitchhiking. They stopped and picked her up and she got in the back seat. She told the girl and her father that she lived in a house about five miles up the road. She didn't say anything after that but just turned to watch out the window. When the father saw the house he drove up to it and turned around to tell the girl they had arrived – but she wasn't there. Both he and his daughter were really mystified and decided to knock on the door and tell the people what had happened. They told him they had once had a daughter who answered the description of the girl they supposedly had picked up, but she had disappeared some years ago and had last been seen hitchhiking on this very road. Today would have been her birthday.

- 2 Construct a short screenplay based on the story making sure you use standard screenplay format. This should include:
  - More than one scene;
  - Screen directions;
  - Dialogue.
- 3 Allocate parts (including a 'narrator' for slug lines and directions) to members of the group and prepare a reading of your script for presentation to the class.

# Story structure

Read the following story and complete the activities which follow.

## The Slave and the Lion

A Slave ran away from his master, by whom he had been most cruelly treated, and, in order to avoid capture, betook himself into the desert. As he wandered about in search of food and shelter, he came to a cave, which he entered and found to be unoccupied. Really, however, it was a Lion's den, and almost immediately, to the horror of the wretched fugitive, the Lion appeared. The man gave himself up for lost. But, to his utter astonishment, the Lion, instead of springing upon him and devouring him, came and fawned upon him, at the same time whining and lifting up his paw. Observing it to be much swollen and inflamed, the Slave examined it and found a large thorn embedded in the ball of the foot. He accordingly removed it and dressed the wound as well as he could: and in the course of time it healed up completely. The Lion's gratitude was unbounded: he looked upon the Slave as his friend, and they shared the cave for some time together. A day came, however, when

the Slave began to long for the society of his fellow men and he bade farewell to the Lion and returned to the town. Here he was presently recognised and carried off in chains to his former master, who resolved to make an example of him, and ordered that he should be thrown to the beasts at the next public spectacle in the theatre. On the fatal day the beasts were loosed into the arena, and among the rest a Lion of huge bulk and ferocious aspect: and then the wretched Slave was cast in among them. What was the amazement of the spectators, when the Lion after one glance bounded up to him and lay down at his feet with every expression of affection and delight! It was his old friend from the cave! The audience clamoured that the Slave's life should be spared: and the governor of the town, marvelling at such gratitude and fidelity in a beast, decreed that both should receive their liberty.

### Activity 1

Read these alternative versions of the story and, in your group, discuss whether or not you think they are better or worse than the original and why.

- a The Slave escapes, finds the cave, meets the Lion, removes the thorn and lives happily ever after in the cave with him.
- b The Slave escapes and meets the Lion, as in the original, but, upon returning to town his master tells him how much he's missed him and promises to be much kinder in future.
- c Everything happens exactly as in the original except that the Lion kills the Slave in the arena.

### Activity 2

In small groups, discuss the story, *The Slave and the Lion* in relation to the following questions:

- 1 Who is the main character in this story? Why?
- 2 What is the difference between the Slave at the beginning and the Slave at the end?
- 3 What are the different goals or aims that the Slave has during the course of this story?
- 4 Does this story feel 'finished'? Why?
- 5 What is this story 'about'? Have the characters learned anything?

# Story structure – analysing *Friends*

## (Season 2 Episode 21 – ‘The one with the bullies’).

Like many recent US sitcoms *Friends* exemplifies a highly condensed economical mode of story telling. In 22 minutes of screen time, this episode contains three distinct stories, each of which reaches a resolution. Each story is told in five or six scenes and, as there is no room for superfluous narrative, they provide excellent material for investigating story construction and causality.

For ease of reference, the following breakdown of the episode includes only the essential bits of narrative information and each element is preceded by an A, B or C, depending on which story it relates to (no hierarchy of stories should be inferred from this).

There are three distinct stories in this episode of *Friends*:

- A The bullies
- B Monica’s money
- C Phoebe’s father



### Scene 1 (teaser)

- B Monica is unemployed and short of money. She’s been watching the business channel and has noticed that there is some stock which corresponds to her initials.
- C Phoebe decides to visit her estranged father because she has been interpreting a range of everyday occurrences as ‘signs’ which are telling her to go.

### Scene 2

- A Ross and Chandler are moved from their usual seat in the coffee house, Central Perk, by two intimidating men who claim to have been sitting there before them. One of them takes Chandler’s hat and refuses to return it.

### Scene 3

- B Monica has had an interview for a terrible job at a fifties themed restaurant. She can’t bear to think about taking it but she is desperately short of money and may have to.
- A Chandler and Ross return and describe how they were bullied.
- B Monica notices that the stock with her initials has gone up and suddenly decides to play the market.

### Scene 4

- C Phoebe arrives at her father’s house with Joey and Rachel, but is chased away by an aggressive dog.

### Scene 5

- A Ross and Chandler meet the bullies again in Central Perk. The bullies claim ownership of the sofa and, after some verbal sparring, suggest that they take their dispute ‘outside’. Chandler and Ross back down and the bullies tell them never to return to the coffee shop.

● Friends

(Worksheet 4)

**Scene 6**

- C Night has fallen and the dog has disappeared, but Phoebe thinks that the dog was a ‘bad sign’ and that perhaps the meeting is not meant to be after all. She drives away and accidentally runs over the dog.

**ADVERT BREAK**

**Scene 7**

- B Monica has been transformed into an enthusiastic trader and is confidently buying shares over the phone.
- C Phoebe reveals that the dog is at the vet’s and will be OK. She feels obliged to let the dog’s owner know, but doesn’t want her first contact with her father to be over the phone and about his damaged dog. Joey phones for her and explains that the dog will be returned shortly.

**Scene 8**

- A Chandler and Ross drink instant cappuccino in Chandler’s apartment, putting a brave face on their enforced exile from Central Perk. Joey offers to escort them later, but Ross becomes infuriated by the situation and argues that they should stand up to the bullies.

**Scene 9**

- B Monica is desperate – she has lost all her money and wants to borrow money from Rachel or she’ll have to take the job in the diner. Rachel can’t help her.

**Scene 10**

- C Phoebe returns the dog to her father’s house. She discovers that her father left four years ago, but meets her half brother Frank with whom she establishes some kind of rapport.

**Scene 11**

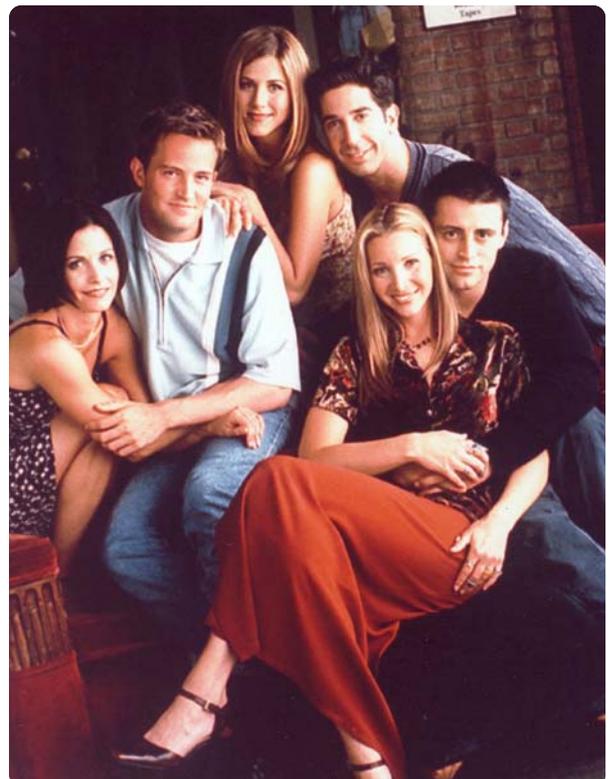
- A Ross and Chandler ‘bravely’ gulp down their coffee in Central Perk and, having asserted their right to be there, dash out. However, they meet the bullies outside. They all prepare to fight, and, after outlawing them as potential weapons, put their keys and watches in a hat. They take some time to establish rules of engagement and, meanwhile, their stuff is stolen by a couple of opportunist thieves.

**Scene 12**

- A Ross and Chandler return to the coffee house with the bullies, flushed with success at their triumph over the thieves. They have all bonded through the experience and decide that they no longer have a problem with each other.

**Scene 13 (Tag)**

- B Monica is suffering at her new job in the fifties diner.



● Friends

# Story structure – analysing *Friends*

(Season 2 Episode 21 – ‘The one with the bullies’)

## Activity 1

Concentrate on the ‘bullies’ story.

- Summarise what happens in each scene with the ‘bullies’ story in it.
- After each of these scenes stop and think – what do you think will happen next? Why?



● Friends

## Activity 2

Again, concentrating on the ‘bullies’ story in the *Friends* episode, would this be as effective if:

- Chandler and Ross accept the bullies’ offer to ‘take it outside’ in Scene 5 and the same things happen as in Scenes 11 and 12? Why?
- Chandler and Ross decided never to return to the coffee shop after the confrontation in Scene 5? Why?
- Chandler and Ross were actually to have a bloody fist fight in the street with the bullies, finally vanquishing their foes? Why?

## Activity 3

Stories tend to have three acts:

Act I: set-up

Act II: confrontation

Act III: resolution

Concentrate on the ‘bullies’ story and break it down into three acts.

- Describe the set-up.
- Describe the confrontation.
- Describe the resolution.

What are the two key events or ‘Plot Points’ that separate the acts? In other words, what causes the confrontation? What causes the resolution?

# Story structure

In a small group, look at the following story set-up:

'Carnelle Scott is young and full of dreams and feeling marooned in Yazoo city, Mississippi. Her only way out is by winning the town's beauty pageant on the Fourth of July.'

**1** How might this story end?

Let's imagine that the resolution to the story is this:

'Carnelle Scott successfully escapes from her home town by winning the beauty pageant.'

**2** Describe the possible story events that might take us from the set-up to the resolution. The following questions might help you:

- Will it be easy for her? Why?
- Will she have to do anything she doesn't want to do? What? Why?
- Will she have to sacrifice anything? Friends? Family?
- Will she be different at the end? How?

**3** What is the key story event, or Plot Point that might bring about Act II – the confrontation?

**4** What is the key story event, or Plot Point that might bring about Act III – the resolution?

# Synopsis of *Joyride*

(Jim Gillespie, 1995, UK)

The film opens at night, there are sounds of a storm brewing in the distance. An engineer is on the phone to a colleague as he inspects a faulty overhead power line. He tells his colleague that the fault is not serious and that he is late for a date so he packs up and leaves.

Changing his shirt while driving, he stops abruptly when he notices a body in the road. He gets out, approaches the body but, when the 'body' turns to look at him and another man approaches him from behind, he realises that this is a set-up. The second man knocks him out.

He wakes up, hands tied, in the boot of his own car, which is now being driven by his attackers. He manages to switch on a torch and then kicks at one of the rear light clusters, in order to disconnect the wiring. The car is then noticed by two police officers who give chase. The ambushers pull over and field questions about the rear light, but when the kidnapped engineer kicks and shouts from inside the boot, and is heard by the police, the villains attack and, we assume, kill them.

The journey resumes and the engineer frantically tries to cut his bonds with a knife from his tool kit. Another police car is now in pursuit and, as it bumps the pursued car, it causes the loose wiring on the light to spark and for a can of petrol to spill over the engineer. With his hands free, the engineer pulls out the main fuse, cutting the power to lights and engine and the car veers off the road, into some woods and crashes.

He staggers from the wreckage – one of the attackers has gone through the windscreen – and makes for the road where the police car has stopped, but the other attacker seizes him from behind and holds a knife at his throat to ensure his silence. Suddenly one of the loose wires from the fuse box makes contact again and the car alarm goes off, alerting the police to their presence. Threatening to kill his hostage, the attacker demands the police car and the police agree and back off, but the engineer, drawing on his last reserves of energy, lunges backwards and knocks down his tormentor.

A policeman helps the engineer out of the woods and comments on the smell of petrol. The engineer realises that he has ended up where he started, at the site of the faulty power line. He calls out to the policeman that, if he had fixed the fault, he would never have met his attackers. As he looks up there is a crackle and a shower of sparks and we cut to black with the sound of sudden combustion.

# Story structure and theme

Watch the film, *Joyride*.

## Activity 1

### Story structure

- Write, in list form, the things that happen in *Joyride*.
- Where one thing happens because of another link them with the word 'because'.

## Activity 2

### Theme

- Describe the main character at the beginning of the film.
- Describe him at the end.
- Write a single sentence which sums up what this film is 'about'.
- If you think it is about different things, write a single sentence for each one.

## Activity 3

### Story structure

Consider the Three Act Structure in relation to *Joyride*.

Act I: set up

Act II: confrontation

Act III: resolution

- Describe the set up.
- Explain where Act II starts.
- Describe the confrontation.
- Explain where Act III starts.
- Describe the resolution.

Phil Parker in *The Art and Science of Screenwriting* (1999) suggests that there are ten basic story types:

## 1 The Romance

A character is seen to be emotionally lacking or missing something or someone. Something/someone – the object of desire – is seen as a potential solution. The character struggles to overcome barriers between himself and the object of desire and succeeds in overcoming some, if not all, of them. The resolution comes when the character unites with the object of desire (eg *When Harry Met Sally*, Rob Reiner, 1989, US).

## 2 The Unrecognised Virtue

The character with a virtue becomes part of someone else's world and falls in love with a powerful character in this world. The character seeks to prove that she is desirable to the powerful character but the power relationship undermines this. The character attempts to solve a problem for the powerful character and, in doing so, her virtue is finally recognised (eg *Pretty Woman*, Garry Marshall, US, 1990).

## 3 The Fatal Flaw

The character has a quality that brings success and enables him to gain opportunities denied to other characters. He uses opportunities for his own gain at the expense of others, but when he recognises the damage he has done he sets himself a new challenge. However, the quality which brought him success leads to failure in the new challenge (eg William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*).

## 4 The Debt That Must Be Repaid

The character wants something or someone and becomes aware that something or someone is available which will possibly give her what she wants – at a price. The character agrees to pay the price later and pursues her original desire. The character attempts to avoid settling the debt but is finally confronted by the debtor and the debt is repaid (eg *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson).

## 5 The Spider and the Fly

The character wants to make another character do his bidding but, having no power to force her, devises a plan to trap her into doing it. The character successfully executes the plan, achieves his initial goal and then faces a new future (eg *Double Indemnity*, Billy Wilder, US, 1944).

## 6 The Gift Taken Away

The character has a gift which she loses and seeks to regain. The pursuit of the gift leads her into a new situation to which she becomes reconciled (eg *Rain Man*, Barry Levinson, US, 1988).

## 7 The Quest

The character is set a task to find someone or something. He accepts the challenge, searches for and finds the someone or something. He is then rewarded, or not, for his success in the quest (eg *Star Wars*, George Lucas, US, 1977).

## 8 The Rites of Passage

The character recognises that she has reached the next 'age' in her life and attempts to learn what she needs to know to adapt to this new age. She tries to act as if she has already acquired the necessary knowledge and fails. She then encounters a challenge which requires her to reach beyond what she has already achieved. Her success reflects her maturation into the new phase of her life (eg *Stand by Me*, Rob Reiner, US, 1986).

(Worksheet 7)

### 9 The Wanderer

The character arrives in a new place and discovers a problem associated with it. In facing the problem she reveals why she left the last place, then attempts to move on again (eg *Shane*, George Stevens, US, 1953).

### 10 The Character Who Cannot Be Put Down

The character demonstrates his prowess in a certain situation but then faces a bigger challenge, which he accepts. He succeeds by triumphing over a range of antagonistic forces (eg *Die Hard*, John McTiernan, 1988, US).

### Other story types

Robert McKee, in *Story* (1998), also offers us a list of story types, a 'genre and sub-genre system used by screenwriters' which includes entries based on setting as well as story structure – the most useful of which are:

- Maturation Plot (the coming of age story);
- Redemption Plot (moral change in protagonist from bad to good);
- Punitive Plot (protagonist changes from good to bad and is punished);
- Testing Plot (willpower versus the temptation to surrender);
- Education Plot (protagonist's view of life/self/people changes from negative to positive);
- Disillusionment Plot (protagonist's worldview changes from positive to negative).

# Story types

Consider *The Slave and the Lion*, *Joyride* and other film narratives you have examined, and put each of them into one or more of the following categories:

- The Romance
- The Unrecognised Virtue
- The Fatal Flaw
- The Debt That Must Be Repaid
- The Spider and the Fly
- The Gift Taken Away
- The Quest
- The Rites of Passage
- The Wanderer
- The Character Who Cannot Be Put Down.

Now try to place them in these categories:

- Maturation Plot
- Redemption Plot
- Punitive Plot
- Testing Plot
- Education Plot
- Disillusionment Plot.

What does this tell you about:

- The story?
- The protagonist?

# Synopsis of *Groundhog Day*

(Harold Ramis, 1993, US)



● Groundhog Day

Cynical, egocentric Pittsburgh weatherman, Phil Connors, after making a 'no blizzard' prediction for the region, reluctantly journeys to Punxsutawney with his new producer, Rita, and cameraman, Larry in order to cover the annual Groundhog Day festivities (a ritual has developed around the idea that if the groundhog sees its shadow on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, there will supposedly be six more weeks of winter). They spend the night in Punxsutawney, cover the festival and head home, but are forced back by the blizzard Phil failed to anticipate.

Phil awakes next morning in his guest house and gradually realises that it is still February 2<sup>nd</sup> and that the day is repeating itself. Initially he thinks that he is ill but soon becomes intoxicated with the idea that, as the day starts afresh every morning, there are no consequences to his actions, and he exploits this by, for example, eating excessively, seducing a local woman and robbing a security van.

He then turns his attentions to Rita, using his special circumstances to discover her tastes and desires and fuel a calculated campaign of seduction. Despite repeated attempts to create the illusion that he is her ideal partner she continues to see through him and rejects him.

Phil then enters a state of despair and, after kidnapping the groundhog and driving over the edge of a quarry with it, repeatedly ends his life in a variety of ways, only to re-awaken every morning back in the guest house. Finally he unburdens himself to Rita, proving through his intimate knowledge of the local people and the events of the day that he is in an extraordinary state. She agrees to spend the rest of the day with him in order to see what happens but, later, they fall asleep in his room and when he wakes up he is alone again and it is February 2<sup>nd</sup>.

He then begins to live differently, treating people with respect and generosity, taking piano lessons and learning how to ice sculpt. He takes a particular interest in a tramp who, despite his best efforts, repeatedly dies. At the end of 'the day' he meets Rita at the party and she witnesses his musical prowess as well as the gratitude of the many people he has helped during the day. When the 'bachelor auction' commences she outbids everyone else for him and, after a walk during which Phil sculpts her face in ice and tells her he loves her, they spend a chaste night together.

The next morning Phil awakes to the same song that has played every morning, but quickly realises that Rita is still with him and that, at last, it is February 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 'spell' is broken.

# Story structure and types

## Activity 1

### Structural analysis

*Groundhog Day* can be divided into three acts. Describe what happens in:

Act I: the set-up

Act II: the confrontation/development

Act III: the resolution

What are the key story events, or Plot Points, that propel Phil, the protagonist, from Act I into Act II and from Act II into Act III?

### Discussion

- Why isn't the blizzard which forces them back to Punxsutawney Plot Point I?
- Why doesn't Act II begin when Phil wakes for the first time to discover it's still February 2<sup>nd</sup>?



● Groundhog Day

## Activity 2

### Story type

Which story type best fits *Groundhog Day*?

- Romance?
- The Rites of Passage?
- Redemption Plot?
- Education Plot?

Why?

# Character

Read the following three extracts from screenplays which introduce us to characters, then answer the questions at the end.

1

INT. HALLWAY. NIGHT

Follow a pair of feet as they shuffle across the cement floor. The shoes are shabby and worn, as are the wrinkled pants that hang too low and loose at the cuffs. The right foot is turned slightly inward and falls with a hard limp. It is clear that the knee does not extend fully.

The sound of a steel door opening. The bottom corner of a steel cage comes into view. Another set of feet falls into step with the first. Another set of feet falls into step with the first. Another steel door and another set of feet. Another door, another and another. Five pairs of feet walk single file down the hall.

The lame feet are in the front of the line. They come to another steel door, this one solid and covered with dents and rivets.

Crane up to reveal: ROGER KINT, 'VERBAL' to his few friends. He has a deeply lined face, making his thirty-odd years a good guess at best. From his twisted left hand, we can see that he suffers from a slight but not debilitating palsy.

*The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, US, 1995). Screenplay by Christopher McQuarrie.



● The Usual Suspects

2

TRAVIS BICKLE, aged twenty-six, lean, hard, the consummate loner. On the surface he appears good-looking, even handsome; he has a quiet steady look and a disarming smile which flashes from nowhere, lighting up his whole face. But behind that smile, around his dark eyes, in his gaunt cheeks, one can see the ominous strains caused by a life of private fear, emptiness and loneliness. He seems to have wandered in from a land where it is always cold, a country where the inhabitants seldom speak. The head moves, the expression changes, but the eyes remain ever-fixed, unblinking, piercing empty space.

TRAVIS is now drifting in and out of the New York City night life, a dark shadow among darker shadows. Not noticed, with no reason to be noticed, TRAVIS is one with his surroundings. He wears rider jeans, cowboy boots, a plaid western shirt and a worn beige Army jacket with a patch reading 'King Kong Company, 1968-70'.

He has the smell of sex about him; sick sex repressed sex, lonely sex, but sex none the less. He is a raw male force, driving forward; towards what, one cannot tell. Then one looks closer and sees the inevitable. The clock spring cannot be wound continually tighter. As the earth moves towards the sun, TRAVIS BICKLE moves towards violence.

*Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, US, 1976) Screenplay by Paul Schrader.

3

INT. BEDROOM. EARLY-MORNING HOURS.

A DOG sleeps on a neatly made bed. A CLOCK reads twenty to six. A SHELF OF BOOKS holds such classics as Dante's Inferno, Beyond Good and Evil, The Catcher in the Rye and The Dark Knight Returns. A FRAMED DIPLOMA, dusty and unkempt, hangs askew on the wall. A snapshot of a girl is stuck in the corner, and a bra weighs one end down. A PHONE sits quietly atop a bundle of laundry. It suddenly explodes with a resounding ring - once, twice, three times. A CLOSET DOOR swings open, and a half-clad figure falls out. THE PHONE rings yet again, and a hand falls upon the receiver, yanking it off the trash can, OC. THE RUMPLED FIGURE lays with his back to the camera, phone in hand.

FIGURE

(groggily)

Hello...What?...No, I don't work  
today...I'm playing hockey at two.

*Clerks* (Kevin Smith, US, 1994) Screenplay by Kevin Smith.

- What does each extract tell us about the character?
- Which one has the most information about 'outer presence', 'inner presence' and 'context'?
- Which one do you think is the most effective? Why?

# Character

Using a slug line and screen directions (but little or no dialogue), in about 200 words, create and introduce a character in a screenplay. You should make sure that you convey information about:

- The impression they create (their appearance);
- Their attitude (personality, temperament);
- The world they inhabit (where and how they live).

When you can visualise the character and their world, consider the following questions:

- What would this character do if her husband was kidnapped and a ransom was demanded?
- What would this character do if a homeless man had a heart attack in front of him?
- What would this character do if he were mugged?
- What would this character do if she were offered a bribe to betray company secrets?
- What would this character do if he had a chance to cheat on his girlfriend?

# Dialogue

Read the following extract from *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, UK, 1997) and answer the questions that follow.

(Screenplay by Simon Beaufoy.)

INT. POLICE INTERVIEW ROOM. DAY

GAZ, GERALD, THE HORSE and THE INSPECTOR are sitting watching the TV screen. Behind them the room is crowded with the rest of the police station, all leering in through the door. Except for the GANG, the room is in good-natured uproar. On the TV, captured by the security cameras, is the GANG'S whole dance routine, including the raid.

GERALD

(to the inspector)

Do you mind a sec?

GERALD leans forward, presses rewind and turns to GAZ accusingly.

GERALD

I told you - look, you're always ahead here.

Watch.

GAZ

You're always bloody behind, more like.

Forgetting where he is now his professionalism has been called into question, GERALD turns to the crowd of POLICE.

GERALD

Look, shurrup, will you?

The crowd of POLICE fall silent. The video plays through.

INSPECTOR

He's right. You're ahead.

GAZ

(annoyed)

Oh go bollocks.

- What does the dialogue tell us about the individual characters and the relationships between them?
- Does any of the dialogue strike you as unusual or funny? Why?

# Dialogue

Read the following scene from *Good Will Hunting* (Gus Van Sant, US, 1997) and consider the questions that follow.

(Screenplay by Matt Damon and Ben Affleck.)

INT. BOW AND ARROW, AT THE BAR - LATER

WILL sits with MORGAN at the bar, watching with some amusement as CHUCKIE and BILLY play a bar basketball game where the players shoot miniature balls at a small basket. In the background we occasionally hear CHUCKIE shouting 'Larry!' when he scores. SKYLAR emerges from the crowd and approaches WILL.

SKYLAR

You suck.

WILL

What?

SKYLAR

I've been sitting over there for forty-five minutes waiting for you to come talk to me. But I'm just tired now and I have to go home, and I wasn't going to keep sitting there waiting for you.

WILL

I'm Will.

SKYLAR

Skylar. And by the way, that guy over there is a real dick, and I just wanted you to know he didn't come with us.

WILL

I kind of got that  
impression.

SKYLAR

Well, look, I have to  
go. Gotta get up early  
and waste some more  
money on my overpriced  
education.

WILL

I didn't mean you.  
Listen, maybe...

SKYLAR

Here's my number.

SKYLAR produces a folded piece of paper and  
offers it to WILL.

SKYLAR

Maybe we could go out  
for coffee sometime?

WILL

Great, or maybe we  
could go somewhere and  
just eat a bunch of  
caramels.

SKYLAR

What?

WILL

When you think about  
it, it's just as  
arbitrary as drinking  
coffee.

SKYLAR

(laughs)

Okay, sounds good.

She turns.

WILL

Five minutes.

SKYLAR

What?

WILL

I was tryin' to be  
smooth.

Indicates clock

But at twelve-fifteen  
I was gonna come over  
there and talk to you.

SKYLAR

See, it's my life  
story. Five more  
minutes and I would  
have got to hear your  
best pick-up line.

WILL

The caramel thing is  
my pick-up line.

SKYLAR

(beat)

Glad I came over.

- What does this dialogue reveal about the characters and how does it do it?
- How does it reveal their interest in each other?
- How does it relate to the setting?
- What information is conveyed that could have been conveyed visually?

# Dialogue

Read the extract from *Fargo* (Joel and Ethan Coen, US, 1996) and consider the questions that follow.

(Screenplay by Joel and Ethan Coen.)

A BEDROOM

We are square on NORM, who sits in bed watching television. After a long beat, MARGE enters frame in a nightie and climbs into bed, with some effort.

MARGE

Oooph!

NORM reaches for her hand as both watch the television. At length NORM speaks, but keeps his eyes on the TV.

NORM

They announced it.

MARGE looks at him.

MARGE

They announced it?

NORM

Yah.

MARGE looks at him, waiting for more, but NORM'S eyes stay fixed on the television.

MARGE

...So?

NORM

Three-cent stamp

MARGE

Your mallard?

NORM

Yah.

MARGE

Norm, that's terrific!

NORM tries to suppress a smile of pleasure.

NORM

It's just the three-cent.

MARGE

It's terrific!

NORM

Hautman's blue-winged teal got the twenty-nine cent. People don't much use the three-cent.

MARGE

Oh, for Pete's - a course they do! Every time they raise the darned postage, people need the little stamps!

NORM

Yah.

MARGE

When they're stuck with a bunch a the old ones!

NORM

Yah, I guess.

- What does the dialogue tell us about Marge and Norm and their relationship?
- Why does it seem strange that this conversation is largely devoted to Norm's painting?
- What don't they talk about? What is the effect of this?
- What kind of language do they use? What is the effect of this?

MARGE

That's terrific.

Her eyes go back to the TV.

...I'm so proud a you,  
Norm.

They watch TV.

...Heck, we're doin'  
pretty good, Norm.

NORM murmurs:

NORM

I love you, Margie.

MARGE

I love you, Norm.

Both of them are watching the TV as NORM reaches out to rest a hand on top of her stomach.

NORM

...Two more months.

MARGE absently rests her own hand on top of his.

MARGE

Two more months.

Hold; fade out.

# Constructing dialogue

Phil Parker, in *The Art and Science of Screenwriting*, provides some pointers on good dialogue in a screenplay:

- 1 It has a clear dramatic function (eg advances the story, reveals character).
- 2 It relates to the visual aspect of the moment (it should relate in some way to what we see on screen – it may be ironically juxtaposed against a setting, for example).
- 3 It is character-specific (a well-established test of this is to cover up the names in a screenplay and see if it is still clear who is speaking).
- 4 It is economical (in a realist drama, dialogue should be short and to the point).
- 5 It reflects the style of the narrative (the way that every character speaks should 'fit' the world they inhabit and should add to the rhythm and pace of the script).
- 6 It delivers only what the action and visuals cannot.
- 7 It is speech, not prose (it should convey the illusion of real speech, even though it is inevitably more structured).

Raymond Frensham, in *Teach Yourself Screenwriting*, offers a list of 'don'ts':

- 1 Avoid 'passing-the-time-of-day' dialogue: greeting, polite nothings, goodbyes etc.
- 2 Don't repeat information in dialogue that has already occurred elsewhere in the dialogue.
- 3 Avoid dialect and writing phonetically: when the character is introduced, the description can contain information about accent, but script readers and actors don't like having to read phonetic representations of voices.
- 4 Never italicise dialogue to create emphasis and try to avoid exclamation marks.
- 5 Not every question asked in dialogue needs to be answered. The use of silence, a reaction or non-reaction can be as, or more powerful than dialogue.

# Dialogue

Choose one of the following scenarios and write a short scene of dialogue (about 500 words) in which the characters negotiate with each other:

- A man tries to tell his father that he is gay;
- A woman tries to break up with her boyfriend;
- A man tries to ask a woman out;
- A child tries to patch up an argument with a friend.

Before beginning to write, consider the following questions about your characters:

- How do they talk?
- Do they have any mannerisms or verbal tics?
- How might they avoid saying what they want to say?
- How might they try to imply particular meanings?
- What do they do with their bodies?
- Where are they? Can their conversations play 'against the grain' of the setting for dramatic effect?

When you have written the first draft of your scene consider the following:

- Is it clear who the main character is?
- What is the difference between the beginning of the scene and the end?
- How has the condition of the main character changed by the end of the scene? Did they start powerful or happy and end up weak or sad? Or vice versa? If the condition of the main character does not change, what is the point of the scene?

# Shot types

## Activity 1

Using the human figure as your subject, sketch storyboard frames showing the following shot types:

- Extreme Long Shot
- Long Shot
- Medium Shot
- Close Up.

Compare your frames with someone else's. Which is most effective? Why?

## Activity 2

Use storyboard frames to show the following movements of the camera and objects within the frame:

- 1 Zoom in on human figure from medium shot to close up;
- 2 Low angle shot of building – tilt down from top to ground level;
- 3 Close up of a hand opening a door;
- 4 Canted angle of a car driving off-screen.

Compare your frames with a partner's. Which are most effective at conveying movement? Why?

## Activity 3

Storyboard the following 10 shot sequence:

- 1 ELS – a character walks towards the camera – s/he pauses near a building.
- 2 CU – s/he looks down at something.
- 3 POV ECU – scrap of paper with an address on it.
- 4 CU – s/he looks up.
- 5 TILT UP to LOW ANGLE on building.
- 6 LS from inside building as s/he opens door and enters.
- 7 CU TRACK of his/her legs moving from SCREEN RIGHT to LEFT.
- 8 LS – s/he arrives at a closed door.
- 9 CU – s/he looks off-screen at door.
- 10 ECU – door number.

Optional:

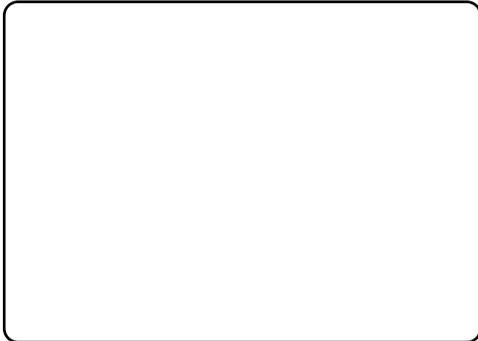
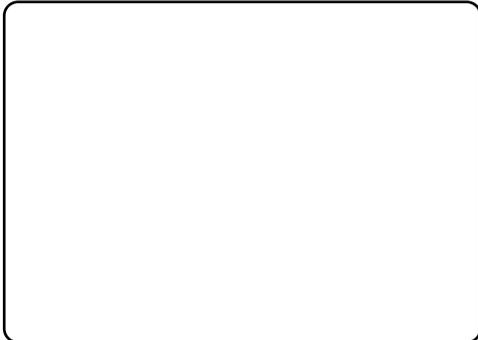
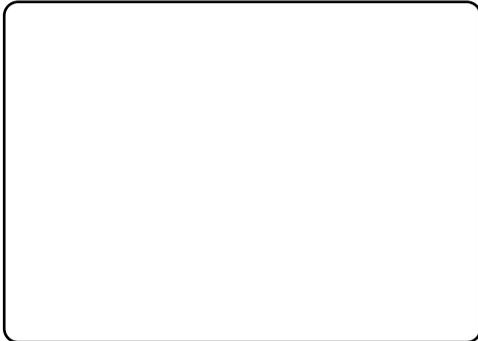
- Using your storyboard as a blueprint, shoot the sequence, 'editing' in-camera by using the pause button.
- Use a tripod for every shot except one.
- Do not use the zoom function (except to frame your shot) or any special effects.

Working title \_\_\_\_\_

Group names \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Shot no.	Picture	Type of shot & duration	Sound/dialogue
			
			
			
			

# Shot types

In small groups create a storyboard sequence based on the following list of shot descriptions:

- 1 CU side-on tracking shot of a woman walking across a car park. She thinks she hears something and turns.
- 2 MS rear angle. Slow zoom into CU on face. She turns back.
- 3 Front angle CU of face. She resumes walking.
- 4 Front angle CU of her feet walking.
- 5 CU of bag as she fumbles for keys.
- 6 CU of her face – trace of anxiety.
- 7 POV tracking LS as she approaches her car.
- 8 CU of her face as she continues to fumble, then breaks into a run.
- 9 CU side angle – her feet running.
- 10 MS rear angle as she approaches car and stops at door.
- 11 CU of door lock as she fumbles with keys.
- 12 High rear angle zoom in to her back.
- 13 CU of keys and lock. She drops keys.
- 14 MS ground level from far side of car as she bends down to look for keys.
- 15 MS rear angle as she bends down.
- 16 MS ground level as she lies on floor trying to reach keys.
- 17 CU of her face and hand as she tries to reach keys.
- 18 POV ground level – male feet approaching the car from the far side.
- 19 CU of her face – panic. She gets up.
- 20 High rear angle – she runs away.

Compare your version with another one.

- Is it clear what happens in each shot? If not, why?
- Is it clear how the shots link with each other to form a sequence? If not, why?

# Sequencing

Choose one of the following six scenarios and create a storyboard consisting of 15–20 shots.

Avoid using dialogue, but make sure that you convey information about narrative and character through

- Shot types
- Sequence of shots
- Camera movement
- Movement within the frame.

## Scenarios

### 1 Late

Character A is waiting for Character B. Character B is oblivious to the fact, until it is too late.

### 2 TV

Character A gets so sick of watching TV s/he makes a decision to do something else.

### 3 Attraction

Character A and Character B notice each other in a public space and are attracted to each other, but one of them is meeting someone else.

### 4 Banana Skin

Character A is careless with a banana skin and it looks as if Character B will suffer the consequences.

### 5 Unwell

Character A begins to feel unusual and has to sit down.

### 6 Unwelcome

Character A is very anxious about the impending arrival of Character B for some reason.

- Pass your storyboard on to another student (or group). Can they make sense of what happens? If not, why not? How can it be improved?
- Can you make sense of someone else's storyboard? If not, why not?

## Activity 1

### Finding a story

It's not easy coming up with a story from scratch. If you need inspiration you could try the following:

- Look at other films (especially if you need to produce something in a particular genre) and consider:
  - What sorts of stories are typical (of the genre)?
  - What sorts of characters are typical?
  - Are there any opportunities for 'hybridisation' or mixing elements from different films?
  - What qualities would you expect a main character or 'protagonist' to have?
- Look at newspapers and magazines and consider:
  - Which of the stories sound interesting?
  - Which would make a good visual story?
  - Can you identify a protagonist?
  - Can you imagine what might drive this protagonist?
- Look at your own experience and consider
  - An event that was funny/shocking/scary/dramatic.
  - How might this event form part of a story?
  - Does an individual emerge as a central character?
  - How might they have reached the moment of the event?
  - What might they do afterwards?

## Activity 2

### Finding a protagonist

You may have an idea for a moment, a character, an image but have difficulty seeing how this could be made into a story.

- Brainstorm for a while – use a big sheet of paper and put your character, moment or image in the middle, then just write down ANYTHING that occurs to you in relation to this central object.
- Your aim is to come up with a main character, male, female, young, old, gay, straight, rich, poor, black, white – who are they?
- Next, what do they want out of life? Perhaps the following list of things that make people act will give you some ideas:
  - Pursuit of love/lust
  - Desire for justice/order/revenge
  - Fear
  - Greed
  - Compassion
  - Ambition
  - Need for validation.
- So what will your character DO in this story? Will they be driven by different things at different points in the story?

**Activity 3****Developing a story statement**

You should now have

- A protagonist;
- A sense of what this character will do in this story;
- A rough idea of what kind of story this will be – a romance, for example.

Write a statement of what your film is about. It should be one or two (but no more than three) sentences long and be based on your central character.

For example:

‘This story is about a policeman who, on his last day in the job before retiring, promises a mother that he will find the killer of her daughter. His promise becomes an obsession and he ends up using another little girl as bait in order to catch the murderer.’

Before you can get to this stage you will need to go through a number of longer versions. You may have loads of ideas for what happens, but try to focus on the ‘essence’ of the story – what and who is it really about?

Read your statement to the group. Make a note of people’s questions and comments – they might help you develop your idea.

**Activity 4****Developing an ending**

You now have a statement of what your story is about.

You now need to come up with another statement which tells us:

- how your story will end;
- how your protagonist will have changed at the end.

For example, if your story were about:

‘A young unemployed man, separated from his wife and son, tries to make some money by organising his unemployed friends into a group of male strippers.’

Your new statement could read:

‘Despite numerous setbacks they finally manage to put on a successful show. The protagonist will have forged a new relationship with his son and, more importantly, managed to regain some self-respect.’

# Categorising the story

Look at Phil Parker's ten story types:

- 1 The Romance
- 2 The Unrecognised Virtue
- 3 The Fatal Flaw
- 4 The Debt That Must Be Repaid
- 5 The Spider and the Fly
- 6 The Gift Taken Away
- 7 The Quest
- 8 The Rites of Passage
- 9 The Wanderer
- 10 The Character Who Cannot Be Put Down

Look at Robert McKee's six 'plot types'.

- 1 Maturation Plot
- 2 Redemption Plot
- 3 Punitive Plot
- 4 Testing Plot
- 5 Education Plot
- 6 Disillusionment Plot

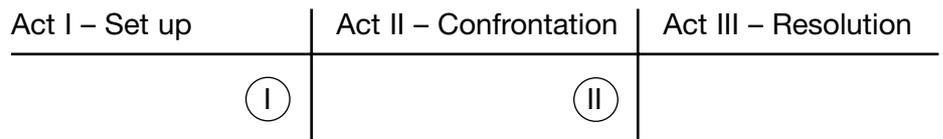
Look at your two statements about your story.

- What sort of story do you have? Does it fall into one or more of Parker's categories? Which ones? If it doesn't seem to fit anywhere why is this? Can you improve it by making it fit?
- Does your story fit any of McKee's 'plot types'? If not, why not? Your main character should have changed in some way by the end of the story – do they? If not, can you make them?

# Structuring the story

The Three Act Structure represents a screenplay. You already know:

- What and who your story is about;
- How it ends.



Use the model above to design the structure of your story. Draw three columns with these headings on an A4 sheet of paper. In the third column summarise the ending of your story.

Now consider the following:

- How will your protagonist get from the beginning to the end?
- What sorts of obstacles will they have to overcome?
- What will the first Plot Point (I) be – the one that forces them to confront something?
- What will the second Plot Point (II) be – the one that drives them towards the resolution?

## Some tips

- The first act must set up who the protagonist is and should tell us if they have a particular need, flaw or quality.
- Plot Point I must be a story event that forces the protagonist to act differently – it should give the character a goal.
- In Act II we often see the protagonist confronting a problem in the wrong way, or looking in the wrong place for something.
- Plot Point II should be something that makes the protagonist realise the right way to confront the problem – they may even realise that it's a different problem – or the right place to look for something.
- In the final act the protagonist is properly focused on the goal. It should build towards a climax – the high point of the story and a final encounter, after which the protagonist is changed – they may have learned something, achieved something or satisfied a need for something.

# Developing a treatment and a pitch

## Activity 1

### A treatment

Write a treatment for your screenplay, with reference to your Three Act diagram which you have used to determine:

- Set-up
- Plot Point I
- Development
- Plot Point II
- Resolution

The treatment should be about 600–1000 words long for a feature length work and about 300–400 words for a self-contained 'short'.

It should be in the present tense and tell us who the main characters are and what happens in the film. Look at an example before writing your own.

Eventually it may be necessary for you to reduce this to a short synopsis, but for now you will find it easier to write the long version.

## Activity 2

### A pitch

You have your treatment. You know what your screenplay is about. Your task is to communicate this in a brief, exciting way through a 'sales pitch'. You will have one minute in which to:

- State the title of your film;
- Give a tagline;
- Make people want to see it.

Afterwards – did they? Why? Why not?

# Developing a sequence

You now have a treatment for a complete screenplay. Unless this is a 'short' you will need to select an extract from it to script. Consider the following:

- Which parts of your narrative would make an interesting or exciting extract in narrative terms?
- Which parts of your narrative would make an interesting or exciting extract in visual terms?

Try to choose a part of the narrative which has a sense of a beginning and a sense of an ending. It could be, for example, a sequence:

- In which the main character (or characters) is established;
- Which features a plot point and builds up to the start of the next act;
- In which a story reaches a climax.

## Activity 1

### Script

Produce an extract of your treatment in script form.

- Break your sequence into scenes.
- Make sure that, in each scene, some sort of change has been brought about – it should move the story along.
- Tell your story visually – don't just let your characters talk at each other, but tell us what we will see on screen that will provide us with narrative information.
- If using dialogue, make sure you know why people are speaking and how.
- Your script should
  - be formatted correctly;
  - consist of approximately 800 words;
  - combine screen directions and dialogue.

## Activity 2

### Storyboard

Produce an extract of your treatment in storyboard form.

- Use different shot types to convey information – an eyeline match, a close up, a point of view shot, a shot held for longer than is merely functional can all convey loads of information about character and intention.
- Don't forget to establish a space before fragmenting it into different shots.
- Be creative and imaginative – try to make your storyboard visually appealing.
- Your storyboard should
  - consist of at least 15 shots and no more than 25 shots;
  - use arrows to indicate camera movement;
  - use arrows to indicate the movement of characters within the shot;
  - indicate the duration of shots;
  - provide information about dialogue, and diegetic and non-diegetic sound/music.

**Beat**

Directional word used to indicate a pause in an actor's speech or action of a sequence.

**Camera angle**

The position of the frame in relation to the subject it shows: looking down (high angle), on the same level (straight-on angle) or looking up (low angle).

**Canted angle (also known as Dutch angle)**

Shot in which the horizontal frame line is not parallel to the horizon.

**Close up**

Shot in which the subject is larger than the frame – approximately from the top of the chest to the top of the head.

**Continuity**

The continuous flow of a film/TV programme where shot follows shot in a smooth understandable way. Effective continuity is dependent upon the logical matching of details, movement and dialogue from shot to shot and makes us unaware of the **cutting**.

**Contra zoom**

An effect created by tracking in and zooming out, or tracking out and zooming in. The subject in the foreground maintains its position within the frame, yet the background changes, thus causing a disorienting effect.

**Cut**

The instantaneous change from one shot to another.

**Diegesis**

In a narrative film (or TV programme), the world of the film's story. The diegesis includes events, actions and spaces which are not necessarily shown on screen.

**Diegetic sound**

Any voice, musical sound or sound effect presented as originating from a source within the film's world. **Non-diegetic sound**, therefore, includes such elements as mood music and a narrator's commentary because they do *not* have a source within the fictional world of the film.

**Dissolve (also known as mix)**

A transition between two shots whereby the first gradually fades out as the second gradually fades in. The technique can be used to create various meanings, eg a slow dissolve can be used to suggest the passage of time between two scenes.

**Editing**

The entire process of assembling a film or TV product, which includes the selection and sequencing of shots, the arrangement of scenes and the integration of soundtracks.

**Establishing shot**

Usually a long, wide shot showing much of the location, intended to prime the audience for an imminent scene.

**Insert**

Close-up shot of an object in the context of a scene.

**Jump cut**

Cut which interrupts the continuity of time.

**Medium shot**

Camera angle often used to describe a shot of a figure from the waist up.

**Mise en scène**

All the elements placed in front of the camera to be filmed - the settings and props, lighting, costumes, make up and actions of characters. *Mise en scène* analysis examines how the arrangement of these elements creates particular meanings.

**OS (Off screen)**

An indication in a screenplay (in brackets after the character's name) that, although the character is present in the scene, they are not visible. Not used in the same way as VO (Voice over).

**Pan**

A camera movement along a horizontal axis, with the camera body turning to the left or right on a stationary tripod.

**Prop**

Object on the set used by an actor, such as phones, guns or cutlery.

**Point of view shot (POV shot)**

A shot taken with the camera placed approximately where the character's eyes would be, showing what the character would see; usually cut in before or after a shot of the character looking off screen.

**Reaction shot**

Shot of person reacting to dialogue or action.

**Slug line**

A header appearing in a script before each scene detailing the location and time.

**Synchronous sound**

The placement of sound so that it seems to come directly from some action within the image, eg, dialogue corresponding to lip movements.

**Tilt**

A camera movement along a vertical axis, with the camera body swivelling up or down on a stationary tripod.

**Tracking shot**

Any shot in which the camera body moves, often on a wheeled support (or **dolly**), forwards, backwards or laterally.

**VO (Voice over)**

An indication in a screenplay (in brackets after a character's name) that a character's (or narrator's) voice only is present. Unlike an off screen voice, this is non-diegetic (it does not exist within the fictional world of the film) and addresses the audience.

**Whip pan**

Extremely fast pan, incorporating motion blur.

**Wipe**

A transition between two shots whereby the second gradually appears by pushing or 'wiping' off the first.

**Zoom**

Shot in which the magnification of the objects by the camera's lenses is increased (zoom in) or decreased (zoom out).

## Fast Forward

### A treatment for a sci-fi short

London. The present. John Foster is 26 and a scientist. He works in a lab for a pharmaceutical company in their research division. It's fairly routine work but he has a laugh with his good friend Simon, a technician at the lab, and at the weekends they party on the various 'designer drugs' that John synthesises in his spare time. At work Simon flirts effortlessly with Sarah, a fellow technician, and it becomes clear that John is rather infatuated with her. Simon encourages him to ask her out, but John is still, at heart, the geeky science kid from school and is too inhibited.

One evening, working late and pursuing his illicit career as 'alchemist of consciousness', John stumbles across a kind of 'hyper amphetamine' which accelerates the entire metabolism to hundreds, maybe thousands of times more than normal. For the user, the world appears to slow down almost to a standstill so that, whereas they may experience ten minutes, only a second or so has elapsed in reality.

Excited by the discovery, John visits Simon and they take the drug together. Out on the street the world, stalled in time, becomes their playground and they play pranks on passers-by. John, intoxicated with the experience declares from the roof of a car that they are 'gods'. Suddenly the drug begins to wear off, the world begins to come to life again and with it come cramps and nausea for John and Simon.

The next day John suggests a repeat performance that evening, but Simon

regretfully declines – he's meeting an old friend. Later, on his way home, John notices Sarah going into a bar. He girds his loins and follows her in but loses the courage to approach her once inside. However, he realises that he could get closer if he takes the new drug. He takes some in the lavatory and, at the motionless bar starts to tell Sarah how he feels, but then follows her eyeline and realises that she is greeting Simon! Confused and feeling a bit betrayed, John then has to deal with the comedown from the drug, which is significantly worse than before.

John now becomes more withdrawn and secretive. He uses the drug to spy on Simon and Sarah, obsessively analysing their body language as if they were statues and becomes convinced that they are lovers. His withdrawals from the drug become progressively worse.

Finally he confronts Simon, accusing him of stealing Sarah behind his back. Simon denies this, telling John that he was simply putting in a good word for him. He realises that John's dependency on the drug has become total and, when John collapses, has to administer a dose to his friend in order to save his life.

At the end we hear John, in voice over, tell us that, far from being a 'god', he is now trapped in this world of statues. We see his lonely existence in a silent, still world. A final close up shows a much older, haggard John kissing Sarah, but it is revealed that she is making love with Simon. John tells us that one day he might have the courage to 'let go', but not yet.