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## Elements of Screenwriting: Getting Started

Guest Post

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by *Michael Barmish*

The Oscar® nominations are out and you've looked at the screenplay nominees and thought, "I can do that." Good for you. Now all you have to do is...write it.

But how does one start writing a screenplay? Maybe you've written a novel and want to adapt it. Or, you have an original idea that just has to play out on the big screen. No matter the material, there is a specific format that one needs to follow just to have a reader look past the first page.

We've heard the staggering numbers. Between 50,000 -100,000 screenplays are written each year. It's like being a salmon trying to swim up a very crowded stream. The good news? Let's be honest, many of those screenplays are terrible. But let's say that even ten percent are decent, even good, screenplays. That means there's still plenty of competition for you to make it to the top of the pile. The point is not to scare you from writing the Great American screenplay that will earn you fame and fortune. The point is to make sure you don't give the Hollywood reader an easy reason to say, "No."

### The Hollywood Reader

Let's talk about the reader for a moment. Think of the reader as the gateway between you, the writer, and the ultimate destination, the producer. Production companies generally assign new scripts to a reader, who will read a script and report on its viability to consider for production. There is this misconception that somehow the reader is the enemy of the writer. This is far from the truth. The only enemy of the writer is the writer him or herself. Readers will submit reports, called "coverage," to the production company. Coverage includes a synopsis of your story, character and plot analysis, and a grade of pass, consider, or recommend. If a reader opens a script that is not formatted correctly, it will never—repeat, never—get a "consider." It may be the greatest story ever told but it will immediately scream, "novice." We can go more into the reader at another time. Just be aware this is part of the process and a major hurdle to overcome.

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## Formulating Your Concept

So, where to begin? There are two key steps one must take before writing the initial FADE IN. First and foremost, you must formulate your concept. If you are adapting a book, obviously the concept is already in place. But with an original screenplay, it's important to write out the concept statement, or logline. A logline is a one or two sentence description of your story that should grab someone's attention to want to hear or read more about your script. Catch a studio or producer's interest and you may be invited to pitch your idea, submit a synopsis or treatment, or even be asked to submit your script.

For example, the logline for the recent film *Argo* is: "A CIA exfiltration expert poses as a Canadian movie producer to rescue six Americans who escaped the US Embassy in Tehran during the 1979 Iran revolution." The logline very clearly and concisely describes the movie's concept in an exciting and marketable fashion. As an exercise, pick some of your favorite movies and write out the loglines.

## Outlining Your Story

Once the logline is complete, the second step is the outline. There is no one sure-fire method to the outline. Screenwriters feel comfortable with their own style and what works for some might not work for others. The most common starting points are:

- Scene-by-scene outline
- "Beat" or "step" outline, a step-by-step series of plot points that detail your story. Each step or beat may encompass several scenes.
- Treatment, a story summary in paragraph format
- Plot as you go, where writers just start writing and plot the story as they go.

Screenwriter



While it's a matter of personal choice, the recommendation for a writer new to the format is to do some form of outline.

## Scene-By-Scene Outline

A scene-by-scene outline is the most time-consuming. However, it usually makes the actual screenplay writing process go faster.

Here's the best way to start this outline: buy a corkboard and set of index cards. Keep in mind that screenplays are more visually orientated than other writing formats. So it's a good idea to visualize the scenes in your head, and then write a summary of each scene on the index cards, using one card for each scene. Include on each card:

- A few descriptive keywords or up to two sentences
- Important scene characters
- Location
- Time of Day
- Some key dialogue (optional)

Time of day will be important as you create the scenes because you not only want to make sure the story makes sense as it plays out, but so does the timeline. While not all screenplays are written in linear style (events in the order





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they occur), flashbacks and out-of-sequence scenes must make sense in terms of timeline.

Pin your cards to the corkboard in sequential scene order. Then, let it sit for a day or two. Allow yourself to come back with a fresher perspective.

Now make sure your story, from plot to storyline, makes sense. Play around with the order to see if moving scenes might improve the storytelling. Most new screenwriters tend to write in linear fashion. There's nothing wrong with this storytelling. But sometimes, changing up the timeline can make your story more visually compelling.

## The "Beat" Outline

With the "Beat" outline, focusing on plot points rather than individual scenes condenses the process. A plot point can encompass several scenes. For example, in the classic film "North by Northwest," the first "beat" would be Ad Executive rushes to business meeting at a hotel. However, this encompasses several scenes, from exiting his office building to getting into a cab, and so on.

For a first-time screenwriter, it's a good idea to perform the same exercise of pinning cards to a board or taping them to the wall and read through the plot points. Does it make sense? Is another sequence better?

## Treatments and Writing As You Go

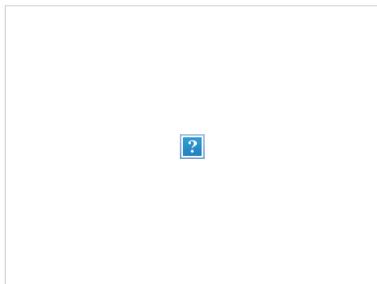
Treatments serve several purposes as they not only can help you plot out your story but can also be used as a marketing tool. Often, producers will request a treatment before the actual script. For our purposes, we'll look at the treatment as an outlining tool and discuss the marketing aspects at a later date.

If you've written novels, then you are used to the format in that the treatment is more narrative in style, and is a synopsis of your story. Think of it as the outline in paragraph form. It can be ten pages; it can be fifty pages. It depends on how detailed you get. Obviously, the more detailed the treatment, the more complete your story is and the faster the writing of the screenplay will be.

Writing as you go is not something I would recommend to a novice screenwriter. There are very successful screenwriters who employ this method. But note the word "successful." They've done it before and chances are they've started with some form of outline earlier on.

The outline is a major piece of the process. Not sure how to begin? Here's a tip: watch your favorite movie and write the outline as plays (yes, you will hit pause a lot!). Not only will this give you practice on your outline writing but it will also give you more insight into sequencing scenes (try saying that ten times fast!). Once you have this down, it's on to the next step.

## About the Writer



*Michael Barmish is a screenwriter and playwright living in Los Angeles. He also writes freelance articles and recently published a book based on his world travels, "The Ensuite Life: Traveling the World and Avoiding the Toilet at the End of the Hall." Michael has been hired for several screenplay projects, including the family film, Kid Cop, which has aired on HBO and ABC Family networks, and was the featured film in the KidFest film festival. Recently, his comedy screenplay won first place in the Holiday Screenplay contest. He maintains a travel blog on [www.ensuitelife.com](http://www.ensuitelife.com).*

Website: [www.ensuitelife.com](http://www.ensuitelife.com)

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**Rita**

January 18, 2013 at 2:59 pm | Reply

1.

Michael, thank you for sharing your expertise with us – it will help many aspiring screenwriters as well as give "food for thought" to the experienced. We look forward to hearing more from you on this topic!

1 likes



**Michael Barmish**

January 18, 2013 at 6:38 pm | Reply

Thanks! Hope it helps motivate everyone!

0 likes



**Markose Abraham**

January 19, 2013 at 12:52 am | Reply

2.

Michael Barmish's introduction to Screenwriting is born out of first-hand experience. His notes on 'Getting started' are useful to a beginner like me. The session has just started. I am looking forward to his step by step climb to the field of Screen-writing. It is interesting and I want to learn more on the subject....

0 likes



**Richard**

January 19, 2013 at 1:52 pm | Reply

3.

All common sense and obvious – once they are pointed out by a master. Very many thanks.

0 likes

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