

An Approach to Creating the Seven Minute Screenplay

Now that we have discussed the elements of dramatic communication and given guidelines for the completed Seven Minute Screenplay, let's look at an approach for creating it.

The proposed approach should not be taken as the sole approach or as a recipe for writing scripts. Indeed, one of the goals of this manual is to help students develop a personalized process of writing. In a way, each project demands its own process, with the final form being the best possible film a particular filmmaker can make at a particular time. Still, the method outlined in the following pages is designed to introduce the screenwriting beginner to the different aspects of writing, and to make them aware of the tasks involved. The process will necessarily become personalized as the student invests themselves in the tasks.

Rational and Irrational Ingredients

Before detailing these tasks, it's important to realize that the process of creating a screenplay is rooted in two types of effort — rational and irrational — and depends upon the successful interplay of the two.

Among the many prominent screenwriters to recognize the interplay of these competencies was the Czech filmmaker Ester Krumbachová, who described the writer's struggle between irrational and rational forces as such:

In the work of the screenwriter, reason and emotion must reach a balance in the course of work. Each of them is one wing of one bird, one wing of an airplane. They both must function, otherwise there will be a crash.

Ester Krumbachová to American students at FAMU, 1994

Again, both rational work and emotional work are necessary in constructing a screenplay. Presumably, the Seven Minute Screenplay will be written in a classroom situation, with a teacher and student peers providing support for the rational dimension. In this regard, certain ground rules are recommended to support the rational work of criticizing and providing feedback upon the developing screenplay. These rules should be openly stated and repeated often, because the emotional investment of the writer may make the rational criticism at times difficult to accept.

Rules for Class Work:

1. Students should work hard to meet deadlines.
2. Students should recognize that the complexity of the task will necessitate many drafts.
3. A common awareness of the writer's goals should be communicated in class so that others can guide in the achievement of these goals.
4. Peers and teachers should provide rational, constructive criticism regarding the shortcomings of the work in comparison to the ideals of the short form set forth in the Ten Guidelines.
5. The classmates should refrain from providing only emotional reactions such as liking and disliking.
6. The final responsibility for creating an emotionally resonant screenplay rests with the writer.

The Individual's Search for Inspiration

Emotional work is possible in class but not likely, since the writer needs to search very personal realms in order to induce emotion. This irrational aspect of the work is often referred to as "inspiration" and it is indispensable. Even something as brief as a sevenminute film will feel intolerably lengthy without inspiration.

The ancient Indian manual on drama, *The Natayshastra*, refers to inspiration as "rasa." Interestingly, "rasa" is both the particular sensation felt by the artist at the moment of inspiration, and the sensation felt within the audience at the conclusion of the drama. Recall Aristotle's requisite that a good drama enables the release or cleansing of emotions, known as catharsis, to take place in the audience. Catharsis, though perhaps difficult to articulate intellectually, must exist as

a lingering emotional vestige, not easily forgotten or dismissed, so that the audience can fully access the drama's import.

Since "rasa" or inspiration may be both what viewers feel after experiencing a drama and that undeniable tingle that a writer feels in his gut when struck with a brilliant idea, the writer should feel encouraged to both trust his initial instincts, and persevere through the less exciting stages of the work.

How inspiration may be found is truly an age-old question. Professor Brendan Ward of Columbia University recommends soaking in a bathtub in the privacy of your own home. Certainly, this method worked brilliantly for Archimedes, who when struck, supposedly leapt out of his tub to race naked through the streets shouting, "Eureka!"

Linda Aronson, in *Screenwriting Updated*, details several effective exercises to help the writer snap out of a rational mindset and indulge in the subconscious realms, where inspiration seems to dwell. Stanislavski's exercise of the "Magic If" is not only a tool for actors, but can be a help for writers in the search of inspiration.

What Makes You Angry

Perhaps the better question to ask is, where to look for ideas? One great filmmaker of the Czech New Wave, Vera Chytilová suggests: "Write about what makes you angry." She believes that the duty of artists is to illuminate and dig into the wrongs and injustices around them. Deep down, many students seem to share this desire.

Inspired vs. Readymade Themes

Ideas might also come from classic fairy tales and fables. Fables have short, simple and well-structured storylines that can be cleverly adapted into contemporary settings, and like fairy tales, carry a ready-made, necessary element of the Seven-Minute Screenplay: a theme.

A story's theme is an intellectual concept or message ideally communicated through the emotional experience of the catharsis. It is one of the most important aspects of the Seven Minute film. It should be compelling and unique. It should feel fresh. It should enlighten audiences and hopefully open the world to the viewer. Indeed, the theme should be inspired. As such, the theme would come from a special and unique place within the writer. Should the writer turn

to ready-made themes from fables or fairytales, there is a danger of creating still-born stories with flat, lifeless characters, acting out pre-determined storylines. Having a ready-made theme might deny the writer the opportunity to express his personal voice and fully enjoy the process of creating and discovering a story.

The Task at Hand

It may be more productive to turn to real life for inspiration and ideas. Read the newspapers, listen to people, and follow the stories and compelling characters that real life presents.

A pragmatic recommendation is to look for inspiration in the task at hand. The Seven Minute Screenplay contains strict limitations, and limitations can often provoke creativity. American novelist Phillip Roth once envied the strict censorship for writers in the Soviet Regime, believing those limitations made decisions about subject matter easier. The Seven Minute Screenplay is a practical class assignment that must justify its time and cost: its deadlines, the grade, the limitations of the Ten Guidelines might all be seen as pressure which can help stimulate creativity.

It is the belief presented here that when the writer confronts the task of writing, inviting emotion and allowing himself time to explore moments of uncertainty; then inspiration, the story and specific theme for the Seven Minute Screenplay will be fully discovered. The theme may be sensed by the writer during his or her first moment of inspiration, or *rasa*, but not fully discovered, let alone articulated, until a later stage.