

SHORE SCRIPTS

COMING UP WITH GREAT IDEAS

INTRODUCTION

You've just finished the last draft of your screenplay. Brilliant. Congratulations is truly in order. You've just done what many give up on and never achieve. Take a moment to celebrate. Relax. Then it's back to work!

Create a submission plan. Who can you send the script to for consideration, which contests can you enter it into that will help boost your career, or is there anyone in your network that can help you make it yourself? These are some of the next steps that a writer needs to take after finishing a project. Problem is, there's a lot of waiting involved in this stage. Waiting for emails to be replied to, waiting for contest deadlines, and waiting for any news that your script has piqued someone's interest.

With any luck, your hard work will pay off, but there's no point sitting twiddling your thumbs in the meantime, plus if you DO get that call back and you get the invariable "We like it, but it's not for us. What else have you got?", do you have more scripts in in your portfolio ready to go out?

If you want to build a screenwriting career, you're going to have to get used to coming up with frequent ideas, working to deadlines, and delivering the goods on a regular basis. While this isn't a problem for some people, others struggle to know what to do after writing that one great idea that they had.

The good news is that coming up with great ideas is a skill that you can learn!

Let's take a look at a variety of techniques that you can use and that will ideally, become life-long habits that will train your brain to find brilliant ideas from the world around you.

GET INSPIRED

Inspiration leads to motivation, and motivation leads to getting those words down on the page, but how do you find inspiration and can it be evoked if it doesn't find you first?

GO FOR A WALK/TAKE A SHOWER

Going for a walk is by far the most common piece of advice given on this subject. Why? Well, for the majority, it's the easiest thing to do. You get exercise, fresh air (hopefully), you can experience what's going on around you etc, allowing you to relax, distract you from your writing, which in turn opens your mind to unexpected thoughts and ideas.

If like me, walking involves taking the dogs with you, which does or doesn't add to the stress, or walking isn't an option for various other reasons, then the shower is another well-known place for ideas to blossom. There's a Showerthoughts subreddit for a reason. Tuning out while doing a daily routine that doesn't need much concentration allows your mind to wander without you realising it, leading to all sorts of profound observations and creative ideas.

WATCH MOVIES

You're not procrastinating. You're doing research! Sure, you can watch movies for fun, but you can also do a little homework at the same time too. Collaborators often do this after deciding to work together. They'll watch a whole bunch of movies in whatever genre they're writing and take notes. What worked and what didn't? What was at the emotional heart of the story? What unexpected moments occurred? How did fans react etc.?

When watching a movie, consider what you would've done differently if you'd been at the helm. Is it a movie worth remaking or reimagining (with permission of course)? Is it a story that could be told in a different genre? Does a short movie inspire a longer story to tell? Take inspiration from other people's work. There's no such thing as an original story, so it's okay to blend ideas together, take a pinch from one place and add it to another, or to look at a story from a different perspective.

TRENDING NEWS

There's no shortage of stories happening across the globe, and you don't have to look any further than your web browser to find them. A lot of news stories are almost too wild to be true or are stranger than fiction, so there's plenty of weird and interesting real-life people, events, and stories that you can fictionalize.

Local news is just as good a place to spur your creativity as national news. Find out what's happening around you and what's gripping your friends and neighbours in order to brainstorm ideas that could resonate with them. Social media is another place to spark your creativity. Again, look at what people are talking about, their fears, worries, and concerns. What's the current mood of the people? Does it inspire you to explore that or to counteract that in some manner?

USE PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

This doesn't mean go out and write your life story. It's very rare that anyone other than you will find it interesting enough and it's very unlikely to be cinematic, but that doesn't mean you can't use snippets of your own life experience when writing stories. If you're a doctor writing a medical drama, then yes, of course bring your knowledge of that world to the page! For the rest of us, our experiences may not be as dramatic, but most of us have had to deal with idiots, we've endured loss, we've had to make difficult decisions, and we've struggled. Those are the life experiences you can add to your own script.

They say 'write what you know', and again, this doesn't mean anyone wants to go watch a dull movie about you and your two dogs living in a small rural town in Scotland (that's me by the way). It means draw on the emotions you experienced during difficult situations and see if you can add them to your story. It means writing down the dialogue you wished you'd said in a conversation that didn't. It means transferring the emotions you felt in a situation onto paper.

ADD EXCITEMENT TO YOUR DAY

We all roughly have the same routine. Wake up, eat, work, play, sleep, with plenty of variations in between, and this drill is something we can all relate to, but it's not exactly the most thrilling or riveting thing in the world, is it? Why not brainstorm various ways to interrupt that routine and to make it more exciting? What incidents could interrupt your normal day? Who is the most least likely person to turn up at your door? What small change in your daily schedule could pivot your journey into a completely different direction?

GIVE YOURSELF A REMIT

It can be hugely daunting when you're tasked with coming up with an idea without any boundaries. Where do you start when you can start absolutely anywhere? Creating a remit can be a great way to help you pull focus and concentrate your efforts.

PICK A GENRE

Knowing what kind of movie you want to write before hand is a great place to start. It helps if you're already a fan of that genre, but it's not necessary, especially if you want to challenge yourself. You don't have to stick to just one genre either. Almost every movie made today is a combination of two or more genres, but if it helps make it easier, stick to one to begin with.

Once you've settled on a genre, get to know it further. What are the conventions that your story needs to stick to? What will audiences be expecting? How can you play with those expectations to give them something 'new, but different'? What is it about that genre that

you love? What are you sick of seeing? What emotions do you need to evoke in the viewers? Keep asking yourself questions while brainstorming in order to both push the boundaries and test your imagination.

SWAP GENRES

What classic stories could you take and adapt into a completely new genre? People claim that Harry Potter was just Star Wars but in a magical fantasy setting, while others will argue that Star Wars is simply the legend of King Arthur but in space. Again, there's no such thing as an original story, so spend some time taking successful, universal, or timeless stories and examining if you can tell them in another genre, a genre mash-up, or sub-genre.

SPOOF AND PARODY

If you're struggling to think of an original idea, it's more than acceptable to make fun of other things out there, whether that's an entire genre, a franchise, a public figure or entertainer. Jot down instances when you used humour to criticise a movie, show, or person. Can you take a serious situation and turn it into a comedic one? What hot topics out there could be explored in a humorous manner?

The most important factor is that you avoid being taken to court by anyone who isn't too happy about being mocked. That's what entertainment lawyers are for, but even if your idea never gets made, that shouldn't mean it should never be written. Scripts that take risks, abandon all budget limitations, or legal restrictions can become contest winners, get people talking about you, and help put yourself on the radar of representatives out there.

REVERSE BUDGETING

Take a look at what's around you. What locations, actors, and equipment do you have access to. Robert Rodriguez took this approach when making his first feature movie, *El Mariachi*, and created a viable story around what he had available to him at the time. Knowing the limitations of what you have is also a great way to spark your creativity, stretch your imagination, and force you to find innovative work arounds to solve practical problems.

Adding limitations can also inspire you in other ways. Brainstorm stories that could occur in only one single location, feature only one character, doesn't feature any dialogue, or takes place during a limited time period, etc. Again, by restricting what's available to you forces you to find new ways to operate and lots of creativity can erupt from that.

CHANGE POV

You can look at this in two different ways. The first is to take an iconic story and to flip it. For instance, instead of a young FBI agent hunting a serial killer as in *The Silence of the Lambs*,

why not have a serial killer hunting the young FBI agent instead? Or flip Jaws to it being a story about a starving great white shark driven to desperation trying to evade the humans trying to kill it etc. List your favorite movies and flip the point of view and see if it creates an interesting new angle worth exploring.

The second way to look at this is to again, take an iconic story, but to look at the situation from the angle of a minor or secondary character. How would the story of Little Red Riding Hood change if we looked at it from the wolf's pov, for example? Is there an unexplored story worth telling about a significant historical event if looked at from one of the minor players involved, such as the security guards on patrol during the JFK assassination or the canteen workers at NASA during the moon landings etc.? Looking at something familiar through a new pair of eyes could spark an exciting story.

DO RESEARCH

If there's a topic that you're interested in and want to know more, you can use that opportunity to brainstorm new ideas too. Knowledge is a powerful tool, and being able to research, ask questions, and broaden your horizons is a great way to become inspired.

USE WIKIPEDIA

Wikipedia isn't exactly a reliable source as technically anyone can amend its contents, but it is a fabulous place to learn about almost everything. For those looking for inspiration, check out the 'Random article' button. It's a lucky dip that takes you to any one of the thousands of entries on the site. Maybe you'll come across something interesting enough to inspire a short film, a character, or it could open you to a whole new world. But beware. It's a slippery slope and you can easily get too engrossed in doing this. Make sure your research is being useful and you don't forget to actually turn your knowledge into a story at some point too.

USE PUBLIC DOMAIN MATERIAL

Copyright only lasts for a limited time period, meaning that there's thousands of previously registered IP's out there available to use. Fairy tales, myths & legends, religious stories, are all frequently being retold, reimagined, and modernised. Disney does this a lot, and with good reason. Those stories still resonate with us today.

The same applies to classic literature. Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Dickens, Mary Shelley, and Oscar Wilde are to name but a few. What new spin could you put on an old story? Which minor characters are worth exploring further? How can you put a modern take on an age-old tale? There's plenty to sift through, so dig deep and see if you can find an old IP worth rejuvenating.

SURVIVOR STORIES

Stories that involve real life people overcoming insurmountable odds make for great movies, not to mention award winning ones at that. While stories like this usually get the rights snapped up fairly quickly but the big studios, there are hundreds of lesser known disasters, tragedies, and catastrophes to take inspiration from too.

You do don't just have to write a story about an existing event here. Put your characters into your own impossible and inescapable situations. *Cast Away*, *Towering Inferno*, *All is Lost*, are all successful stories about survival, and of course, your MC doesn't have to be a human either.

ADDRESS SOCIAL ISSUES AND INEQUALITIES

Some social issues never seem to go away. Racism, gender inequality, homophobia, the class war, the list goes on. This means that these big issues remain relevant and relatable to audiences, so how can you apply this to your ideas? Think of ways in which you can add these issues into your story world in order to give it a fresh take, to add a new perspective, or to make it more contemporary. Basically, you're trying to avoid being predictable, bland, and generic here.

Would changing the gender of your MC add more layers to your story? Does changing the race of your character better reflect modern life? Should any of your characters be affected by social injustices no matter what scenario they may be in? Would giving any of your characters a disability allow you to add in even more conflict into the story? Does the financial state of your MC change the way they behave or the way they're treated by others? Explore, experiment, and mix things up and see what unexpected new paths and problems could occur in your story.

EXPERIMENT

Rather than scouring the internet, experiencing life, or waiting to be influenced by someone else's work, why not spur that creativity yourself? Get playful, ask questions, let your imagination do the work.

WHAT IF?...

Using the 'what if?...' technique can be a great way to train your brain into automatically looking for creative answers and generating new ideas. You simply start off by writing 'what if' and you let your imagination take you from there. You can turn this into a story-writing exercise too by adding "and then..." or 'but...' for as long as you can. What if... an alien fell in love with a human... but... the man didn't reciprocate those feelings... and then.. the alien gives him an ultimatum 'it's me or total earth domination' but... and so on and so on.

This is also a great way to construct a logline too. “What if the aging patriarch of an organised crime dynasty transfers control of his empire to his reluctant son?” You simply take away the ‘What if?’ part as such ‘The aging patriarch of an organised crime dynasty transfers control of his empire to his reluctant son.’ To create the logline.

START WITH THE ENDING FIRST

Not everyone knows how their movie will end, but perhaps they should. If you do have an idea on how it ends, try working backwards to find out where it starts. There’s a series of questions you can ask yourself to help you trace the journey backwards, such as; What clue led the characters to that place? What line of dialogue was spoken that led to that clue being uncovered? What action occurred to prompt that line to be said? What problem was that action trying to solve? What happened or was said to create that problem? And so forth. Work backwards to see where your story will lead.

START WITH THE ENDING OF AN OLD SCREENPLAY

If you’ve already got a finished screenplay or short, you can use that as springboard to create a new one. In much the same way as working backwards, keep asking yourself a series of questions that could lead to new and unexpected answers.

What’s the worst thing that can now happen to the MC? Which unexpected character could turn up, creating new problems? What deception could be revealed that turns the MC’s world upside down again? How can you further exploit your MC’s main character flaw? Can you place your MC into a new location/setting for a new adventure? Is there scope to introduce a new romance or create a love triangle? What unforeseen consequences could have occurred due to the actions the MC took in the previous script? Keep testing the waters, there could be potential for a sequel, spin-off, or ways to use your IP in another medium.

TAKE IT TO THE EXTREME

All too often, we let logic, realism, and common sense limit our imaginations. Try taking the metaphorical seatbelt off and let your imagination take risks, live dangerously, and take you into the unknown. You can do this in a number of ways. Take a boring or average character and place them in an extreme situation or location. Daniel in Mrs Doubtfire is a great example of this when he decides that dressing up as an elderly nanny is the only way he can think of to spend time with his kids. It’s extreme, but it worked.

Deliberate what your characters worst fears might be. How can you continue to make things even worse for your characters? What ridiculous lengths might a character go to when faced with loss, separation, or driven by ambition etc.?

CREATE HABITS

Now you have a better idea of how to find, search and generate new ideas whenever you need, consider turning this into a regular routine in order to make the process of creating ideas into a habit that over time, will start to come to you much easier and naturally.

KEEP A JOURNAL

There's nothing worse than having a brilliant idea, not writing it down, getting distracted by something, then not being able to remember it later on. To avoid this, use a purposely designed journal, a pocket-sized notebook, jot ideas into your mobile phone, even scribbling things down on scraps of paper will do. The point is to have something to hand whenever inspiration strikes (so yeah, having a pencil or pen on you would help here too).

Having all of your ideas down in one place is also an excellent way to sift through them, discard the poor ones, expand on the potential ones etc. Ideas come in endless shapes and forms, so jot down anything from catchy movie titles, interesting character traits, to funny one-liners in your journal. You never know where they may lead.

MAKE A ROUTINE

Having the ability to capture an idea on the go is great, but you don't have to wait until inspiration grabs you from out of nowhere. Many successful writers make it a habit to set aside specific time dedicated to coming up with new ideas, and you should too. This can either be a set time, such as half an hour at the end of the day, an hour at the weekend, or during a ten-minute commute, or a set target, such as 10 ideas, 5 ideas on a certain subject, or brainstorming 20 different loglines for your project etc.

They say that it takes approximately 6-weeks before a habit becomes a fixed routine, so give this a decent shot if you can. You'll be surprised at the volume of ideas you're able to come up with using this method. Soon your only problem will be choosing which one to work on first, which isn't exactly a bad position to be in.

TRY FREEWRITING

You can do this in conjunction with creating a regular routine dedicated to coming up with ideas, but rather than jotting down specific ideas and thoughts, you just let everything out on the page in one giant go. The principle behind free writing is that you start writing and don't stop. That's it. What comes out on the page won't always make sense. It's often more of a stream of unconscious thought, but you'll quickly discover that certain words, themes, and visuals keep reappearing on the page.

While this technique can help you achieve a state of controlled creativity, these inner thoughts may not always be related just to movie ideas. You might end up revealing inner emotions, subconscious desires, or stresses and worries you've been having, but this is also a great way to explore themes, motifs, and patterns that you can apply to your writing too. An additional benefit is that you'll build your self-confidence AND you're strengthening your writing at the same time.

CREATE A MOOD BOARD

Sometimes called an inspiration board, this is a tool to help you start thinking **visually**, and at the end of the day, that's what film is all about, isn't it? Collecting images, visual references, creating color schemes, fonts, etc, that communicate the look and feel of a project you're already working on or want to develop further can really help get you generate new and unexpected ideas along the way too.

Scour the internet, save images to a folder, or go old school, pick up a pair of scissors and a pile of magazines, newspapers, posters, whatever. A mood board can also be an excellent pitching tool too, helping prospective creative to get a more visual sense of your vision, so this isn't just something to do during the early stages of a project.

STORYBOARD YOUR MOVIE

You don't just need to be coming up with new ideas before you start a project, the whole process of writing a screenplay requires you to constantly be revising ideas and looking for better ways to deliver information, so creating a story board can be a very useful exercise, especially during the rewriting stage, even if you're not going to be the person directing your script.

You don't need to be a professional artist to start storyboarding. Stick figures and basic drawing is more than enough to help you translate the words in your script into visual shots on screen. Doing this will help you discover the details in your script that are either missing, or aren't needed, whether you can cut or amalgamate scenes, and help you spot problem areas that need more brainstorming to fix. Plus, it's really fun to do!

CONCLUSION

These are but a few ways to help you get your creative juices flowing (and hopefully, to keep them flowing). Don't put too much pressure on yourself. Forced ideas usually aren't that valuable. Practice makes perfect. If at first great ideas don't come, keep at it, because they will. There are no original ideas – that's been mentioned a few times in this workbook – but

putting your own unique spin on old ideas is what's going to help you stand out, so be confident in your abilities. Now get brainstorming!