

SHORE SCRIPTS

MAKE THE AUDIENCE CARE ABOUT YOUR CHARACTERS

If the audience don't care about the characters in your movie, there's not a lot to stop them from walking out, changing the channel, or giving a bad review. Equally, if the reader isn't invested in who they're reading about, then you risk them putting the script down and picking up another one that does.

Big budget blockbusters full of special effects can sometimes be guilty of placing the importance of spectacle above that of the characters, missing the opportunity to create a more emotionally engaging story, and certain genres, such as disaster, or slasher, don't need to overly rely on creating secondary characters that we care about, because they'll quickly be imaginatively or gruesomely killed off. But ultimately, the protagonist (and antagonist) need to be characters that we want to follow long enough to see them reach the end of their journey.

Care doesn't mean the same as like here. You don't have to have likable characters to ensure the viewers stay tuned, but they do need to be compelling. We've got to be interested in them and what they're going to do next. So, how do you make the audience (and reader) care about your characters enough to keep watching? Here's a list of 15 ways to maximise the emotional connection the audience has with your characters. Read through each of them and see if applying one or more will enhance the way we'll feel about the characters you've created.

PUTTING THEMSELVES BEFORE OTHERS

Characters who show admirable traits, such as bravery, kindness, or selflessness are usually welcomed by the audience, especially when it's to protect an innocent. This is sometimes referred to the 'save the cat' or 'pet the dog' moment. You can have a horrible cranky, bigoted, self-obsessed character, like Jack Nicholson's Melvin Udall in *As Good As It Gets*, who initially the audience despise, but as soon as he starts to become emotionally attached to the small dog he's unintentionally looking after, we slowly begin to warm to him too.

Exercises

- What small act of kindness could your MC do that also ties into the central theme of your story?
- Which unlikable character in your first act could your MC act sympathetic or show mercy towards, showing the potential for empathy?
- Create a moment of self-sacrifice for your MC where they give up something they really, really want for someone else.

Instant Peril

Placing a character in direct danger can create an immediate desire for the audience to want them to find safety, and this works particularly well when used as cold opens or teasers of tv shows. The classic example is the baby on the rail tracks. Imagine opening on the image of an infant sitting in front of an oncoming train. We don't need to know the baby's backstory, how it came to be on the tracks, or even for the baby to be distressed. Most people will instantly hope that the baby is going to be saved, thus making them care straight away.

Exercises:

1. Move the scene where your MC is in the most danger to the beginning of your script. Does it change/add to the way we feel about them or create a more engaging hook?
2. What's your MC's biggest fear? Have them face it during Act 1 to discover what impact it creates.
3. Up the stakes. Make whatever your MC has to lose even greater. Does it help us to connect with them even more?

Make Them the Underdog – Two-thirds of us naturally feel compelled to root for an underdog. Wanting the lesser person, or team, to win over a superior competitor adds excitement, and subconsciously, there's a little bit of envy in there, meaning that we don't feel as bad when the favourite wins. *Rocky* is the classic underdog

story; a not-so-bright thug with a heart of gold becomes an all-American hero, but your character doesn't need to be in a sports movie to be an underdog. *Slumdog Millionaire*, *The Pursuit of Happyness*, and *Hidden Figures* all have characters overcoming huge odds, and winning the audience's heart in the process.

Exercises:

1. Shatter your MC's dreams. Give your MC a moment during the first act where everything they've been working towards is lost.
2. Create a character who's better at everything than your MC. They don't necessarily have to be unlikable, but it helps.
3. Give your MC an impossible goal. The harder the challenge, the bigger the underdog your MC will be.
4. Create a scene where your MC is persecuted for something that wasn't their fault.

Give Them a Flaw – No one likes perfect characters that easily overcome every problem they face. They're boring to watch, and we're more likely to resent them more than love them, plus perfect characters are unrealistic. People like flawed characters because they can relate to them. We're all flawed ourselves, so watching someone struggling with something we're also familiar with creates empathy. Ideally, the central flaw should be something that's stopping your MC from reaching their goal, but a flaw doesn't necessarily have to be a negative trait. A weakness, vulnerability, or limitation works just as well.

Exercises:

1. Make a list of potential flaws/limitations for your MC that would make it harder for them to achieve their goal.
2. Thinking about your MC's character arc and where they need to end up, which flaw would work best to establish where they started?
3. List 10 ways that your characters' flaw/limitations could cause them to fail and 5 ways it could help them succeed.
4. Think of 5 different ways to make your MC feel vulnerable during the first act.

Give Them Admirable Qualities – Loyalty, honesty, and courage, are examples of traits that give a character credibility and respect, but the positive traits you give your characters don't always have to be so grand. You can easily have a nice person who's respectful, polite, open, or intelligent etc, and the audience will still be drawn to them. The key is to have your characters display these traits, rather than have this expressed via dialogue. Show, don't tell, remember. And be consistent. If a charismatic complimentary character starts to criticize people behind their back, for example, they'll come across as insincere and untrustworthy.

Exercises:

1. Take your own friends and family as a starting point and list the admiral traits that you like in them. Can you instil any of these into your characters too?
2. Write down ten different ways your MC could exhibit their best trait. Can any of them be used your script?
3. Place your MC in a position where they have a chance to be a mean, but aren't or in a situation that they could easily run away from, but choose not to.

Make Them Grieve – Experiencing loss is a universal emotion that almost everyone can relate to. It doesn't have to be the loss of a loved one, it can be the loss of a home, a career, not being accepted, anything; as long as it's clear that whatever has been taken away was extremely important to the character involved. Pixar's *Up* does this superbly. Not only does the ten-minute montage of Carl and Ellie's entire relationship, right up until her death, provide the reason behind Carl's decision to tie hundreds of balloons to his house, his grief also helps us see beyond his grumpy, stubborn behaviour. While grief can also be great motivating force that turns a good character bad, it's also great at creating a shared sympathy (or pity), evoking an emotional connection for between character and audience too.

Exercises:

1. What's the most precious thing your MC could lose? Would losing this during the first act allow audiences to sympathise as well as understand their motivations?
2. What tragic event could also be used as an inciting incident to spur your MC into action as well as evoke sympathy?
3. Think of 10 prompts that would shake your MC out of crippling grief, forcing them to become active characters again.

Give Them Regrets – Regret (and guilt) is an emotion that shows positive growth, and we like characters that have the ability for change. Recognising weakness in one's self and feeling bad about it helps to show this, so being apologetic about something can help the audience view a character in a better light, even if they've just done something terrible, accidentally or not. Take Sylvester Stallone's mountain rescue character in *Cliffhanger* for example, where even against his best efforts, he's unable to save his best friend's girl, something that not only haunts him and creates added tension between those characters, it creates empathy and understanding for both of their subsequent actions and motivations.

Exercises:

1. Think of 5-10 actions (or lines of dialogue) that your MC would instantly regret doing.
2. Make your MC aware of their shortcomings. Is it enough to prompt them to change?
3. What big mistake(s) has your MC made that's altered the way they behave? Are there any ways for them to redeem themselves during the story?

Have Other Characters Like Them – If the supporting cast like your MC, then the audience are more likely to warm to them too. If your MC is loved or needed by those around them it can be a quick and easy way to establish them as characters we should also be rooting for. Creating a dependable character, such as a side-kick, pet, or child, is a quick and easy device that can help show that your MC is someone we should like, and this works best when the supporting cast themselves are likeable characters too.

Exercises:

1. Use the way your supporting cast act/reacts when your MC isn't around to show how much they care about that character.
2. Which attributes could you give your supporting cast that would best mirror/juxtapose against the traits you want the audience to like about your MC?
3. Use your secondary characters to construct a scene that shows us that the MC doesn't realize how awesome they are.

Give Them a Relatable Goal – If your MC wants to achieve the same thing as your audience do, they'll instantly have something in common with them. A universal goal is something we can all root for. The important thing here is to also have your character express a strong desire to achieve their goal AND for there to be some big stakes should they fail. The bigger the stakes involved, the more the audience will be invested. Make your MC's goal personal. If they're emotionally invested, so will the viewers. Even your antagonist needs to have a personal reason which is motivating whatever they're trying to achieve. It won't necessarily make us like them, but it'll make us understand them, compelling us to follow your characters.

Exercises:

1. Write down why your MC's goal is so important to them. The more personal, the more it'll resonate with the audience.
2. Create compelling consequences. What terrible thing will happen if your MC fails to achieve their goal? Make it personal if possible.
3. The more impossible the goal seems, the more we'll root for the MC. List reasons why the problem your MC faces is so difficult to achieve.

Create Backstory – Backstory works best when it's actively moving the story forward, rather than telling us information we already know or isn't relevant to the current choices and actions that your MC is taking. You don't always need to use flashback to reveal pivotal information, as you can easily include backstory via dialogue and action, and it's a great tool to use when revealing character motivation. Backstory helps us to understand and relate to a character, revealing why they're doing the things they do. Would we really believe that a billionaire likes to dress up as a vigilant bat hunting down criminals if we didn't know that his parents had been murdered during a mugging and that he'd overcome his own crippling fear of bats before hand?

Exercises:

1. Take your MC's central flaw, what events could have occurred to have created that flaw in the first place?
2. Take your MC's goal, what events occurred to make it so important that they achieve it?
3. Take your MC's emotional need, what events could have occurred in their past to have created it?
4. Use mystery to keep the audience engaged. What clues could you plant about your MC's secret backstory that will later result in a rewarding reveal?

Make Them Unique – Audiences can get bored by watching the same old stock characters playing the same old roles. The hooker with a heart of gold, the wise old mentor, the hardboiled detective etc, are borderline cliché. Cool and original characters are compelling, but this is also fairly subjective, so be warned. What you might find entertaining, may rub someone else up the wrong way, but often if your characters are funny, entertaining, or exhibit a memorable trait, they have the potential to become iconic. Making an individual unique doesn't just mean quirky and don't only rely on making them look different, but use their actions to make them stand out too.

Exercises:

1. What unique goal could you give your MC to make them stand out more?
2. What gives your MC the X-factor?
3. Write down 10-20 different phrases, sayings, or mannerisms that you could use to make your MC more memorable with a unique voice.
4. Come up with 10 interesting or unusual character names for your MC.
5. Taking genre into consideration, what new twist could you give your MC that will buckle audience expectations?

Make Them Talented – If a character is particularly great at something, has a unique skill or ability, it also makes them compelling to watch. Being a genius, the best at something, or being incredibly highly skilled can show that a character has put in the work, have determination, fortitude, and a whole host of other admirable traits.

Exercises:

1. Make a list of skills for your MC that could help them stand out.
2. Keeping genre in mind, which skills and talents will the audience be expecting your MC to have? What unusual and unexpected twist can you add to this?
3. Turn the most boring aspect/subject of your story into an interesting one, by making the MC an expert at it.

Make then Funny – If a character makes us laugh, we're more likely to see them in a favourable light. This works even better if your MC is the only funny character in the cast, placing all the attention on them. Genre plays a big part on whether this works or not, as a comical detective probably isn't the best choice for the lead in a tense thriller, for example. Having a good sense of humour is often high up on the list of desirable qualities we look for in a partner, so whether it's a dark humour, satire, or visual slapstick etc., a character that makes us laugh could help keep the reader turning the page and the viewers on their seats.

Exercises:

1. Write down 10 scenarios where your MC's flaw could be used to create comedy.
2. List your MC's traits, both positive and negative, can you exaggerate any of them to enhance the comedy of a situation?
3. Use the way secondary characters view the MC to generate humour and mirror the way you want the audience to respond.

Make Another Character Even Worse – You can have a really horrible character with few redeeming qualities and still make the audience feel for them by simply having an even worse character to compare them with. We all hated Cersei Lannister in *Game of Thrones*, but when she was out-villained by sect leader the High Sparrow, who wanted to force the 'will of the Gods' on the population, Cersei's evil doings maybe didn't seem so bad, gaining this callous character sympathy from the audience. Another example is the entire ensemble cast of *Suicide Squad* who by rights are a gang of murdering criminals, yet when pitted against an ancient witch hell bent on destroying mankind, they suddenly become the heroes.

Exercises:

1. Think of 5 ways that an even worse character can ruin a moment of victory for your unlikable MC.
2. List scenarios where your unlikable MC is the lesser evil. This doesn't have to be compared to another character. The bigger evil can be a natural disaster, monster, or impossible decision etc.
3. Examine the relationship between your unlikable MC and the true antagonist. In what ways can you make the conflict between them personal in order to elicit our emotions?

Great Casting – As the writer, you probably won't have a great deal of control over this, but if you are part of the production team, landing a hugely popular talent to play a dubious character in your script could be its saving grace. Take Peter Venkman in *Ghostbusters*, for example. He's close to being a sexual predator by cheating on tests to flirt with a young female student, but he's played by the lovable Bill Murray, so we end up forgiving his bad actions. This is a bit of last resort to use if you've been unable to create a character that the audience can't connect with, so don't

make this your first choice of methods, especially as it'll have no effect on the person reading your script.

Exercises:

1. List your top 5 ideal actors to play your lead.
2. Now list why you love them and what makes them ideal to play the part.
3. Try to apply the attributes you've listed to the MC in your story.