

SHORE SCRIPTS

WHICH FORMAT FITS YOUR IDEA BEST

INTRODUCTION

There's a few more formats on the spectrum than there were a mere 20-30-years ago now available to creative writers. Spurred on by the development of new media and increasingly cheaper technology, it's led to a spark in do-it-yourself filmmaking. Creating and exploiting your own intellectual property (IP) is now something you should be thinking about, so let's look at what exactly IP is, why it's important, and more importantly, which is the best fit for your ideas.

WHAT IS IP?

I think this quote from the [World Intellectual Property Organization](#) (WIPO) sums it up nicely - "Intellectual property (IP) refers to creations of the mind, such as inventions; literary and artistic works; designs; and symbols, names and images used in commerce."

IP is protected by law, but you need to register or have sufficient evidence to prove that an IP belongs to you first. You can do this via copyright, patents, trademarks, and in your case, also registering your script with a writer's guild.

In its most basic form, it means that you own the rights to your own creations. It's why you need to pay for the rights to play someone else's music in your movie and it's why you can't write a script based on someone else's novel, comic book character, or video game without their expressed permission too.

WHY YOUR IP IS IMPORTANT

There's various ways you can exploit your own IP to help generate revenue and find a wider audience for your work, so it's a very useful thing to understand. Just look at *Star Wars* as possibly one of the most well-know examples. Rather than accept a hefty 300% pay rise to direct *Star Wars* after the success of *American Graffiti*, George Lucas offered to work at the same rate on the condition that he retained all merchandising rights and the rights to any sequels. At the time, the studios thought they were getting a steal. Little did they realise the

power and profit that could be made from mechanise! Today *Star Wars* licenced toys alone produce \$3 billion a year in revenue.

That one great idea that you have for a movie or tv show doesn't have to only stay a movie or tv show. You can adapt or sell the rights of the characters and story world that you create into anything from novellas, web series spinoffs, graphic novels, advertising, merchandise, the list goes on. And the same can be reversed. The movie *Battleship* was based on a board game. The upcoming *Fallout* tv series is based on the video game franchise, *Snowpiercer* was originally a French graphic novel before it was adapted into both a film and tv series, and *Homecoming* is a fiction podcast adaptation for the screen.

As you can see, not only can you obtain the rights of already existing IP to create your own work (not to mention the ton of IP that already exists in the public domain that's freely available to use), but there's lots of exciting and innovative ways to exploit your own IP too.

WHAT FORMAT FITS YOUR IDEA BEST?

You first need a starting point, but how can you tell which format best suits your screenplay ideas?

Let's look at the five most useful means of telling your story as well as the pros and cons of each one.

SHORT FILM

A short film is just as good as any screenwriting contest win when it comes to helping your career. It's a great visual calling card to have in your portfolio and it's also a faster way to hone your craft, both behind the camera and on the page.

Pros:

- Shorts are cheaper to produce than longer formats.
- They're quicker to write.
- There's more room for experimentation.
- Shorts are also easier to make, giving you're a greater chance to earn that all-important screen credit.
- There's more chance of getting a prospective agent to click a link and watch your movie than reading a lengthy screenplay.
- It's a great way to learn about the production side of the business if you get hands on and make your own short.
- There's potential to reach a huge online audience and start building a fanbase.

Cons:

- If you're only interested in screenwriting, the prospect of getting involved with production can be daunting.

- You need to become a jack-of-all trades in order to finance, market, produce, and distribute your film.
- Your film is less likely to have big named actors.
- Production time can take you away from writing time.
- Shorts generally don't make any money.

WEB SERIES

Often referred to as webisodes due to their episodic nature, think of a web series as tv without the need for a network. They've become increasingly popular thanks to the rise of video streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime as well as video-hosting platforms like Youtube, Vimeo, and TikTok.

Pros:

- There are no gatekeepers. Anyone with a great idea can write, produce, and publish a web series.
- Being online means there's the potential of going viral, increasing the exposure and chances of getting picked up by tv networks or Hollywood.
- There are no commercial breaks or broadcasting time slots to adhere to, allowing for a more flexible structure.
- There's much more creative freedom and control.

Cons:

- They're not known for making much money.
- It takes time to build a following, especially if you drop all the episodes at the same time to allow for binge watching.
- Cheaper production values can also cheapen the product.
- Episodes are typically 5-15mins in length, meaning you need to have more thrilling, high-paced, and compelling content than in a longer piece.

FICTION PODCAST

Screenwriters are now in demand to adapt their stories for audio listening, and this steadily booming industry can be an easier way for new writers to break in and find audiences.

Pros:

- Your story can take place anywhere at any time. There's not limits to what your imagination can come up with here.
- This growing market is easier to break into than traditional film and tv routes.
- It's by far the cheapest way to produce when compared to visual mediums.
- There's no rules. Series and episodes can be any the length. There's no advertisers or broadcasting remits to adhere to. Anything goes.

Cons:

- There are no visuals. You need to rely on telling your story via sound alone, which can be challenging for screenwriters.
- Stories need to be much more gripping as audiences are typically doing other things while listening, such as housework, commuting, getting ready for work.
- It's becoming harder to stand out as the market becomes saturated.
- It takes time to build up an audience and find a following.
- You shouldn't have any more than 4-5 characters in a scene to avoid confusion in the listener.

TV PILOT

These are your traditional sitcoms, comedies, and continued dramas (soaps), and also your 1hr dramas, mini-series, and procedurals. Audiences differ from network to network, each of which have different remits when it comes to acquiring programming.

Pros:

- You get to explore your characters and the story world much more than in a one-off feature film or short.
- You'll become an expert at condensing story and a master at intertwining multiple plot threads.
- You'll become a more disciplined writer.
- You can reach a much wider audience than in film, influencing and inspiring people across the world.

Cons:

- You'll need to create a tv bible when it comes to pitching your project.
- You'll need to work to strict deadlines.
- Becoming a showrunner is highly competitive. It's likely that you'll have to serve your time writing episodes another people's projects rather than your own.
- You may need to structure your story to conform to commercial breaks.

FEATURE FILM

Pros:

- You get to see your work up on the big screen.
- It's the most lucrative field for writers in the industry if you make it.
- You can write a contained story that your passionate about and then move onto something completely different without the pressure to continue the story.
- It's the ultimate flex. You're one of the very few who wrote and sold a screenplay!

Cons:

- Once you've sold your spec script, it becomes someone else's baby.
- It's very hard to break in and maintain a career.

- There's no shortcut to success. It takes time to hone your screenwriting skills.
- Film production takes a very long time. Projects often go on hiatus and you may very well never get any work produced.

Now, in order to figure out which of these best suits your idea (at least to begin with) examine the following questions.

Does your story have a fixed ending?

If it does, you have a feature film or a short. If you have a rolling ongoing conflict instead, use an episodic format instead.

Do you have a large cast of characters?

If yes, then you should probably consider a 1hr tv format, which will enable you enough time to explore and develop each one.

Do you want to fully explore the story world and all of the characters?

You've unlikely going to have time to do this in a feature or short film, so an episodic format is advised.

Are the most exciting parts of your story the first and third act?

If so, you may suit a more episodic format where you can hit the viewers with a gripping pilot and then leave them on a high with an explosive ending.

How much conflict does your story have?

If you're only looking at one small incident/moment, then a short film is for you. If you think the dramatic problem is big enough to carry the story for 90+ minutes, you have a feature. If there's endless possibilities and potential story threads created by the central conflict and characters, you should look to using an episodic format, such as tv, a web series, or fiction podcast.

CONCLUSION

There's lots of things to consider when deciding which format will work best for your story. Sometimes the page-count of your script is going to be a useful indicator as much as the size of your cast or the size of the budget is. There's one common denominator in every format they you should adhere to regardless, and that's keeping the audience engaged throughout. Take a look at how often you have a big hook, an unexpected reveal, a plot twist, or a new compelling question is created in your story and decide whether those moments would make great endings to shorter pieces.

Also consider which format is going to be easiest for you to write in and break into. You maybe have to alter your plot and your expectations in order to give your career the best chance. Writing shorts can be an excellent training ground for wannabe feature writers, as

much as web series and fiction podcast creators are for those who want to break into tv, so keep the bigger picture in mind too.

Ultimately, it could come down to you writing in the format that excites you the most, in which case, that passion is going to be a massive boost to your success as opposed to you forcing yourself to write in a format that you may think increases your chances, but just isn't igniting that spark in you. Go forth and choose wisely.