What’s the Difference Between a Screenplay Outline and a Treatment

On my original introductory post about the principles of screenwriting, I wrote that “in filmmaking, the story is first developed in the screenplay.” That is only half-true. Within the Phases of Film Production, it is true that the film only begins to exist with the screenplay (this “document” is needed for planning, casting, budgeting, scheduling, etc). However, within the world of screenwriting, the story can be developed in a multitude of different ways.

Over the weekend, April left this comment on the aforementioned post:

Hey there. I wanted ask what you understood the difference between an outline and a treatment to be. I’ve come to understand the treatment to be composed of sequences, character bios, and a logline, not in that order. And an outline to be composed of act breakdowns, and scenes. And feel that a good, thorough enough outline can be the basis for a script. What do you think? Maybe another difference is the purpose of each as well?”

Inspired by April’s questions, I wanted to shed light on these two elements of screenwriting. But before we focus on the key differences, let me give you an overview on both:

What is a Script Outline?

The outline is part of the writer’s creative process. It is a tool or a resource that will guide you through the completion of the screenplay. Due to its always-changing nature and its free-form style, your outline shouldn’t be shared with anyone but a writing partner or a mentor.

Technically, the script outline doesn’t have a specific format (since no one but you and your collaborators will see it). In my own scriptwriting, there are two kinds of outlines that I always use. I have developed them overtime, and they are what work for me.

One is a bullet-point outline with quick and short descriptions and actions (they can be one sentence or one paragraph long). The other is a scene-by-scene outline where I specify the scene locations, the characters in each scene, and my own goals for each scene as well as goals for the characters. (Defining specific goals allows me to focus on purpose and amp up the conflict of every scene.)

Examples of a Script Outline

Here’s how one of my bullet points might look like:

Tom lecturing to a Computer Science class in his alma mater (a course he took twenty years ago). Insight on himself, the FBI, and Cybercrimes. Perhaps followed by a Q&A. Jump to Instructor’s office. Instructor pours two glasses of Red Label, and he thanks Tom for “coming down, the kids love it.” + What else happens? Maybe Tom confesses that he is unhappy. Or maybe Instructor, asks “how’s your mom?” and Tom reveals that she thinks his brothers Carl is doing drugs or something.

(This is only one bullet point. My final outline will have dozens of them.)

Note how I mention a specific character (Tom), a setting (his alma mater), and the scene’s exposition (“Insight on himself, the FBI, and Cybercrimes”), which will help with dialogue during the scripting phase. That is enough to get my writing started. There are typos and there are “maybes.” It’s just an outline, anything could change. This bullet point also includes a second scene at the Instructor’s Office and hints at a predicament that might drive the story later on (Tom reveals that his mother thinks his brother Carl is doing drugs or something).

TIP: During the outlining, it’s okay to turn off your self-critic brain (hence the grammatical errors and my uncertainty of what’s really happening). Use the creative momentum to allow your story to go where it wants to go. You can evaluate and modify later.

Now my scene-by-scene outline is more specific and complete. Here’s an example of how I might outline a scene:

INT. HARVARD UNIVERSITY – LECTURE HALL – DAY

Tom lecturing to a class jam-packed with students. His visual aid is a PowerPoint with the diagram “The Life of a Computer Bug.” It includes a flowchart with Hackers, Antivirus Companies, and other entities you’ve never heard of . He’s a guest lecturer. The instructor, his childhood friend, Abraham McCoy watches from the corner of the room. Today’s topic is cyber-crimes.

During the Q&A, one well-read student drills Tom about how the FBI collaborates with the NSA in spying on American citizens. Tom dodges accusations, trying to put a positive spin on the topic, maybe even joking, but other students join the first one: “Don’t you think every American deserves privacy?”, “Do you think it should be illegal as opposed to just unethical?”, “How would you like if your family was being spied on?”

SCENE GOAL: Explain how hackers profit from bugs (foreshadowing), establish Tom’s smarts and his technique, some insight on the FBI and Tom’s career as a Special Agent for the cyber division.

CHARACTER GOAL: Tom just wants to get out of there (he’s exhausted and worried about something else.)

VALUE: +/-

This outline is much more thorough and specific. The slugline or heading (INT. HARVARD UNIVERSITY – LECTURE HALL – DAY) is in the same format I would use in a screenplay, which helps with the writing later on.

The description/action are just shorthand of the more elaborate stuff that’s coming later.

The two Goals are exactly what they sound like. They are infused with purpose, reminding me why this scene exists and what the character wants. And if I don’t know the goal, then maybe I should cut out the scene (I definitely won’t write it if I don’t know why it’s there).

The Value helps me quickly assess the positive or negative outcome of the scene. In this case, the scene started out on a positive note (FBI Agent as a Guest Lecturer sharing his experience in a Prestigious University), but it spiraled down to what I call a negative charge (NSA and privacy lambasting). So when I see the +/- icon (meaning it went from positive to negative), I know that the conflict escalated. If I see -/+, that means some conflict was resolved. Sometimes I use a -/- if the character went from bad to worse. The +/+ usually indicates a scene without tension. They are fair game, but if you see too many of those, you’d better make sure you have enough conflict to sustain the film.

Again, there are different techniques to write an outline. Some would defend the notion that you should include everything in the scene-by-scene outline, even the dialogue! Give it a try and see what works for you.

Why do I use Two Different Types of Outline

Every writer has to develop their own method. Our goals are often the same, to strike a balance between efficiency and creativity. Obviously, one of my main goals is to save time. Since the scene-by-scene outline I use is so robust and thorough it takes way more time than the quick bullet point outline I do first.

The reason I start with the bullet point is because it allows me to quickly evaluate the story I have. If something doesn’t feel right, then I wanna be able to identify the issue as a bullet point (that took me a couple of minutes to write) as opposed to an outlined scene (that took me maybe 15 or 30 minutes to write). Do you catch my drift?

What is a Script Treatment?

Unlike the outline, which you write for yourself, the treatment is a document that writers show to producers and other prospective collaborators in order to quickly showcase the story and the feel of the project. If you are an established screenwriter with a solid treatment, you may be able to sell it. Ka-ching!

The advantage of the treatment for both writers and producers is that it’s a short document, usually between 3 and 5 pages long, so it takes less time to write it and read it. It is written in prose with long blocks of text. There’s no especial formatting for dialogue or scene heading. It looks and reads like a novel but in the present tense.

If you already have a screenplay, then the treatment becomes superfluous because if you were to sell something, you might as well sell the screenplay.

You should know that un-established writers have zero to no chance of selling a treatment, so the only use for it is as an outline to their script (BEFORE writing it). If you are trying to break in, then you must write the screenplay because that’s the way to prove yourself.

If you need an example of a treatment, there’s a link below this chart to the treatment for James Cameron’s Terminator.