

# Scriptwriting<sup>1</sup>

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This publication about scriptwriting is the second of a four-part series on developing effective video production practices. This series also covers [video production](#), [video equipment and video shot composition](#), and [video editing](#).

## Introduction

Writing you have done to this point in your life mostly has been for “the eye.” In other words, the writing produced text to communicate an idea; the words on the page had to make sense for one’s eyes to read the text and comprehend its meaning. For audio and video productions, you must write for “the eye” *and* “the ear.” Not only does the script have to read well for the eye, but it also has to sound good for the ear. This publication provides an overview of good scriptwriting techniques.

## Scriptwriting Techniques

*The writing style should be conversational.* You do not always talk in complete sentences, which may mean writing sentences in your script as sentence fragments.

*Each sentence should be brief and contain only one idea.* In some of your previous writing for “the eye,” you may have gotten used to stringing sentences together with commas. In video and audio writing, sentences should be brief. Each sentence should focus on one particular idea.

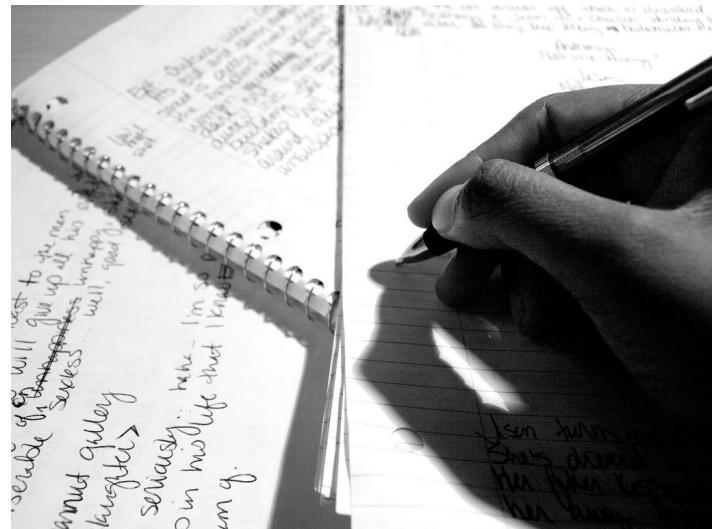


Figure 1. Scriptwriting

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*Be simple and direct.* If you give your audience too much information, your audience cannot take it in. Choose words that are familiar to everyone.

*Round off large numbers.* Detailed numbers should be left out. For example, do not say “6,049 people attended the football game.” Instead, round it off to “around 6,000 people attended the football game.”

When writing a script for an educational or promotional purpose, *one of the best formats to follow is introduction, body, and conclusion.* The format for writing educational

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and promotional videos is similar that for writing speeches: “Tell them what you’re going to tell them” (introduction), “tell them” (body), and “tell them what you told them” (conclusion).

- The *introduction* provides an overview of the topic and gains the audience’s attention. In many cases, you should say clearly what the video covers or what you want the viewer to learn. For example, you might say, “In this video, you will learn the steps to groom a horse.” The introduction is where you “tell them what you are going to tell them” in the overall video.
- The *body* of the video provides details about the topic. For a video on horse grooming, for example, the body would show all of the steps on proper horse care. The body “tells them” the content.
- The *conclusion* summarizes the main points. For example, with the video on grooming a horse, you could summarize the major content by reviewing the steps briefly at the end of the program. The conclusion is where you “tell them what you told them” in the video they just watched.

## Writing the Script

After you have determined what the major content is for your script, you need to start writing. To help you get started in the scriptwriting process, here are some tips:

- *Divide your page into two columns.* Video commands, explanations of what shots you need, and other special effects traditionally belong on the *left* side of the page. These video directions should take up about one-third of the left column. Anything related to the audio—including narration, music, and sound effects—should be included on the *right* side, taking up to about two-thirds of the right column. This will help you visualize what you need to say and will remind you to explain what you need to show.
- *Decide what type of approach your video will need.* Will the program consist of narration only, covered by video clips? Will a narrator be on-screen the entire time? Will you include interviews? While a straight-narrated script with no interviews is much easier to write and control, the use of interviews can make the video more interesting for your audience.
- *Consider your audience.* This is important throughout the *entire* production process. At the scriptwriting stage, such questions as the following arise: *What will the*

*audience members’ interests be? How much do they know about this topic?* You also have to write on your audience’s knowledge level. Do not use words that would be difficult for your audience to understand.

- *Consider the video’s length.* How long will you be able to retain your audience’s attention? An adult audience’s attention span will last about eight to ten minutes; for children, plan for three to five minutes. If posting to YouTube, your video should be less than ten minutes in length (most videos on YouTube are five minutes or less). Videos, of course, can be longer, especially if the intended audience is interested in the content presented.
- *Write the way you speak.* Write in simple, easy-to-understand sentences, and write how you talk.
- *Use on-screen text to support what you say.* For instance, if your video is about a new training program with six components that you are about to describe one by one, show them as text on the screen as you tell the audience about them. This approach also will assist your visual learners by reinforcing the information. On-screen text that appears below a person’s face is called a *superimposition*, or *super*.
- *Use pauses, music, natural sound, and special effects* to avoid lengthy sections of narration. One reason to use music and special effects is to indicate to your audience that you are changing topics. *Natural sound* (or *nat sound*) is the audio that is naturally in the environment where the video is shot. For example, chirping birds is the natural sound you might hear if you are shooting video in a forest. Barnyard noises would be examples of natural sound for a video about rural living. Keep in mind that you should get permission from music companies to use copyrighted music in your videos. You can avoid problems with music by using copyright-free (or royalty-free) music. You can find many companies on the Internet that sell copyright-free music.
- *Keep it simple.* Remember that your video should tell a story without your having to say everything. If your video shows children intent and focused on a classroom lesson, you do not need to tell your audience that children in the classroom are “intent and focused on their lessons.”
- *Develop a storyboard or a shot outline.* The purpose of the storyboard and the shot outline is for you to visualize what the program will look like before any video is shot. This way you will have a good idea of what you will need to shoot beforehand. Otherwise, you may not shoot

enough video or you may not shoot the correct angle of video for your program. A **storyboard** is a series of drawings with captions that describe video shots and their accompanying audio or narration. A storyboard can be as simple as stick figures or as complex as digital photographs that you take of locations that you plan to use in your video program. The storyboard should provide a rough commentary at the bottom of each shot. You do not have to include every shot in the storyboard. A **shot outline** is a detailed written description of the video you plan to shoot. A shot outline may be preferable if you do not have drawing skills.

- *Read the script out loud when you are finished.* When you read the script out loud, you will probably pick up on some words or phrases that are difficult to pronounce. You may not have picked up on these difficult words by reading the script “in your head.”
- *Get someone else to read your script.* After you have finished writing your script, let someone who represents your intended audience read it over. You may learn that you have included jargon or inadequate explanations in some areas, or perhaps you have left gaps in the content that require your attention. You also can determine what areas your intended audience will find the most and least interesting.

## Scriptwriting Checklist

When you have finished writing a polished draft of your script, use the following checklist to determine if you need to make any changes:

- Have I explained myself in simple language?
- When I read the script out loud, does it sound as if I am talking to an audience – which is what I want – or just reading to an audience?
- Have I avoided using jargon or technical language?
- Have I used music and natural sound to help tell my story and break up constant narration or interviews?
- Do I have any lists or main ideas that could be reinforced as text on the video screen as they are being discussed?
- On the script, have I included proper titles and name identification of on-screen speakers?

- On the video column of the script, have I described the type of video shots, graphics, or other video special effects I need?

## Additional Information

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