



SHORT FILM

A short film is a visual story that has a beginning, middle and end. Audience become involved with the story as they watch it unfold in front of them. It is set somewhere. And like all screen stories it is about **someone who wants something** badly and is having difficulty getting it.

The someone is the **protagonist** (also known as the central character), the protagonist needs to be interesting to watch. We should understand things about them by what we see them doing and the way in which they do things. Even if the point of the story is that the protagonist is a boring person, you need to show the audience why they are the *most interesting* boring person. (e.g. I.R.S. Agent Harold Crick (Will Ferrell) in STRANGER THAN FICTION.)

We need to understand by seeing **what the protagonist wants**. In THE FLY <http://onesmallwindow.com/interviews/interview-with-olly-williams/> the protagonist (the get-away driver) *wants* to kill the fly. In THE LUNCH DATE <https://www.filmsshort.com/short-film-pages/the-lunch-date-adam-davidson.html#.Xn25XIj7Q2x> the protagonist (the affluent older white woman) *wants to not have to engage* with black people.

What is preventing the protagonist from getting what they want? A set of circumstances usually embodied by a character (the antagonist). In TUFTY <https://vimeo.com/9379302> it is the Hunter.

This award from Kerry Film, is for a short film between ten and 12 minutes duration. Within the 10/12 minutes on-screen you need to establish **the world of the story**. That is, the location that this story plays out within. In THE LUNCH DATE it is the crossing point of different types of people, in Central Station.

In THE CRUSH <https://www.rte.ie/culture/2020/0325/1126249-the-crush-watch-the-oscar-nominated-irish-short-film/> it is the world as seen from a child's perspective. In THE FLY it is an urban contemporary world where banks are robbed and police patrol.

Ten – 12 minutes is a short time on-screen, so the stories that are not overly complicated or that do not require much set-up, work best. Consider the most **engaging moment to start your film**, it does not need to be the first moment in linear time.

In THE WEDNESDAYS <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dy0ObR1WFFg> the film starts when the couple is arrested, a dramatic moment, and then tells the story that has happened, until we are back in forward moving time. There is a twist or surprise at the end where the couple will continue their new lifestyle without the tabs.

Often short films that work well have a surprise or twist that creates the ending of the film. In I'LL WAIT FOR THE NEXT ONE <https://www.filmsshort.com/short-film-pages/ill-wait-for-the-next-one-philippe-orreindy.html#.XQNzbohKhPY> the twist is the reveal that what we and the protagonist were watching was a performance.

Most importantly of all, is that really-powerful short films, regardless of genre, are about *something*. In some way they are commenting on our world and making us pause and think. TUFTY is a story about a bear, but it is also making us consider animal rights. THE LUNCH DATE is an expose of racism and prejudice, in the end the protagonist has been made aware of her assumptions. THE WEDNESDAYS is a comedy about recreational drug-use but it also reminds us that old age can be isolating.

Recognising a good idea for a short film:

- Does the film revolve around a *single* event?
(Not every short film has to revolve around a single event but those that do tend to work very well within the limitations of the form.)
- Is it realisable within the 10 – 12 minute duration i.e. can you *show* the beginning, middle and end of the story on screen?
- Does the film have an *engaging character* (protagonist) at its centre?
- Does the film have a *strong ending* and/or twist?
- Is the film *about* anything?
- Is it achievable with the resources at your disposal?
- Remember you will be shooting your film in beautiful Kerry so explore interesting locations (not necessarily conventionally picturesque) in the county that might provide an arresting image and suggest story.

Troubleshooting:

If the answer to some of the above is “no” try to solve the issue:

- Can the idea be simplified into a single key moment? Is there a key moment/scene in the film or story that could stand on its own?
- Is there a striking image that could be the starting point, middle or end?
- What’s most interesting/intriguing thing about the central character (protagonist)? Would it be more interesting if the character was older/younger/male/female/on holiday/recently bereaved/had just won the lottery/been told they are going to die etc.
- Reverse the ending – is this more surprising? What is the opposite of what one would expect? (This will probably impact on the tone.)
- What is the thematic subject-matter of the story? List other things associated with the theme, can some of these be attributed to characters?
- Try putting the central character in opposition to their environment and/or other characters to generate dramatic conflict.

Often you will find the answer/solution to your problem in research, so explore the world of your story.

Checklist for a strong script:

Your script is a template for a film, delete anything written on the page that we cannot see on the screen.

Scenes

A script is made up of a series of scenes. A scene is the smallest unit of action. When there is a change of location, even if the time is continuous, it is a new scene. If the time jumps and the location remains the same, it is a new scene.

Every scene must **move the story forward** and/or reveal character. Come into each scene **as late as possible** and exit as early as possible. In every scene someone (not necessarily the protagonist) must want something.

Action Description

Action description is not prose writing. It should be able to be read in the same time that you would see the action described, layout on screen.

Ensure that you have allocated the correct amount of screen time, on the page, to the action. A page should equal a minute on screen. So, if you want your character to be on-camera staring off into the distance for 20 seconds, you need to write action description to cover one third of the page (this can be broken into paragraphs for emphasis and clarity).

Choose words that suggests and supports the tone of the film you are making.

As far as possible write in the present continuous tense (ing) as that suggests to the reader that the action is unfolding in front of them and creates forward moving story.

Sound is a very important element of film, **write in the sound** to create atmosphere. Sounds off-screen (O.S. or O.C. off-camera) should be written as action description.

Dialogue

Before you write your dialogue have considered the scene and how much story you can tell by the location and showing what the characters are doing. Can you tell this story beat without any dialogue?

Film is a visual medium, **show don't tell**. Don't rely on the dialogue to relay the story. Dialogue is there to help build characterisation and to show the characters attitude to the world. Giving audience plot information through dialogue is very boring to watch, this is called expositional dialogue and as far as possible should be cut.

Often a script will need some exposition in dialogue for audience to understand what has happened off screen. When you must include this information try to make the exchange interesting for audience by turning the information giving into a comedic exchange or a conflict exchange.

Dialogue is not real speech and is used to help build characterisation. How and when a character speaks and the words or phrases they use should tell us about who they are, (what their level of education is, where they might be from etc.) and their attitude to the world they are in, on-screen.

Avoid greetings on-screen when characters meet each other, if you have to have them make sure they are interesting (funny/full of conflict/subtext).

What readers and commissioners look for in short film submissions?

- Originality of the idea and/or originality in the execution.
- Not derivative or generic.
- A visual story that also makes use of sound and location in the telling of the story.
- Interesting characters, well-characterised on the page.
- Clarity on the tone and genre.
- Moving or enlightening if a drama.
- Funny, if a comedy.
- Scary, if a horror.
- Thrilling, if a thriller.
- Not twee.
- Not offensive.
- Not a feature squashed into a short format.
- Not an advert extended into a short film.
- Something that has the ring of truth.
- Your personal view on the world.
- A story well told.
- Brave and ambitious.
- Something you, the writer, cares about – passion comes through in writing.

Resources:

www.filmsshort.com is a good place to watch short films.

<http://www.australianshortfilms.com/> has scripts of produced short films to read and films to watch.

Some other short films you might learn from:

THE DOOR https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qn99F3X_LDQ

SPEED DATING <https://www.filmsshort.com/best-short-films/Best-American-Films-1.html#.XQNztohKhPY>

STANDBY <https://vimeo.com/207630463>

THUNDER ROAD <https://vimeo.com/174957219>

