

## Introduction to Dramatized Summaries

### Assignment Preparation:

What need to do before reading this document:

1. If you haven't already seen the film, rent and watch Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), with Jack Nicholson and Faye Dunaway.
2. Read the *Chinatown* treatment.
3. Read *Screenplay: Writing the Picture* (242-252).

### Assignment Goals:

When you're finished with this writing assignment, you should be able to

1. Identify and describe in detail the main elements of dramatized summaries such as the pitch, the treatment and the synopsis
2. Write and revise towards greater concision, using significant details, sharpening the focus of your sentences and your story.
3. Tighten your sentences using strong active verbs rather than wordy "is" verbs and clunky prepositional phrases.
4. Show *and* tell.

You'll write three dramatized summaries for this class, the first two—the pitch and the treatment—growing in size, progression, detail and focus until you're ready to write your script, the last included when you turn in your final script:

1. **The Pitch** (three sentences maximum)
  - Due early in the course, to be workshopped one week with the rest of the class's pitches, then rewritten for a grade.
  - Designed, along with the Ackerman Scenogram, to help you imagine, propose and focus your script idea through two pitch drafts, identifying briefly the story's main characters and turning points.
  - Also called a "short pitch" (*SWP*, 338) or a "logline," for script readers, agents and online script sites, written to "hook" potential script buyers and compel them to take the next step and read your treatment or your entire script.
  - Also written to introduce a longer pitch in pitch meetings with script agents and studio executives, giving them in just a few sentences the entire shape and storyline of the script.
2. **The Treatment** (ten pages maximum)
  - To be workshopped once each, two each week, until we've workshopped all the treatments, then rewritten for a grade by the end of "Act 1" of this course.

- Designed, for the purposes of this class, to help you develop and summarize in more depth the turning points and main scenes of your script through two drafts.
  - Used by script readers, agents and script sites to “hook” potential script buyers and compel them to read an entire script.
3. **The Synopsis** (one page maximum)
- Due at the end of the semester, turned in with your final script.
  - Designed to create a dramatized summary of the script you’ve written in one page to “hook” potential script buyers and compel them to read an entire script.

### **Dramatized Summaries as Script-Development Exercises**

Unlike actual pitches, treatments and synopses used in the film industry (as described in “The Pitch,” *Screenplay: Writing the Picture*, 331-345), these three assignments will be, for the purposes of this class only, *script-development exercises*, designed primarily to help you *discover* and *develop* your script story *before* you write your script. Remember:

1. These assignments may change significantly through several drafts.
2. You don’t have to stick with these pitches if you decide to change your script idea, but they can help you focus your story through several *re*-visions.
3. When you’ve finished the final draft of your script for this class, you’ll probably need to revise these assignments again significantly before you use them professionally, based upon *what you’ve written* rather than *what you planned to write*.
4. The process of writing these assignments is *at least as* important as the product—that is, you may not know what your script story is about until you’ve written your pitch, Scenogram and a treatment, sharpening your story as you go—and even then you may not know for sure until you’ve written several drafts of your script. In writing as in life, it’s probably better to enjoy the journey than to obsess about the destination.
5. It may seem as if you’re doing things backwards by summarizing your entire story *before* you write your script—Who writes a summary or uses an outline for *fiction*?—but thinking about the entire story is important in developing the dramatic shape of your script before you write it, saving yourself countless hours of writing without a map or plan.
6. You can always depart from your pitch or treatment when you write the script, taking surprising detours along the way

as you deepen characters and develop complex storylines you may not have originally conceived.

7. These assignments are intended primarily for your own *discovery*. The more you surprise yourself, the more you'll surprise others.
8. Don't be afraid to take risks.
9. Don't be afraid to change your mind if it'll make your script work better for you.

## The Elements of Dramatized Summaries

Dramatized summaries share certain elements in common:

1. They are *not* general or vague.
2. They show *and* tell, but mostly they show *only what we can see and hear*.
3. They use significant details—that is, one or two *surprising* but telling details that *show* character, setting, conflict and the like.
4. They summarize both *action* and *dialogue*, using strong, specific images, to create a film in the reader's mind.
5. They're summarizing, dramatizing *and* marketing tools, designed to "hook" a potential producer, agent or viewer.
6. They create compelling stories about *specific* conflicts and *specific* characters who must make difficult, sometimes impossible choices in moments that define and utterly change them from one state to its opposite—in a dramatic reversal. (Some characters in scripts don't change, but *we* do when we recognize the tragedy that someone can't change, so the reversal is *ours* and not the characters'.)
7. Somewhat like movie trailers and descriptions on the backs of DVDs in your local movie rental stores, they must tell the stories with increasing conflict and suspense, making the reader want to read on, and to see the film. They withhold information *only* to create suspense, never to confuse.

## The Importance of Specificity and the Inevitable Surprise

The most common misapprehension about dramatized summaries is that they're general, that they *tell what the script is about* rather than *show what happens*:

This is a heartbreaking story of love, betrayal and the meaning of life.

Your story may be about all of these, but you have to *show us and let us see and judge for ourselves*. You must trust us as sophisticated readers and film viewers—people who've read countless books and seen thousands of TV shows

and movies in our lifetimes—and you must try to stay at least one step ahead of us at all times. If we expect something to happen and we're right, films become predictable. If you reverse our expectations in a believable way again and again, we'll stick with you all the way.

Just remember:

1. If you try to write a *universal* story, you're probably writing a *general*, uninteresting story.
2. If you try to write about a "typical," "normal," or "standard," character, you're probably writing about a stereotype, and people don't want to read about stereotypes; they get frustrated and upset with you when your characters are one-dimensional—yes, even action heroes and comic-strip characters. (Peter Parker in *Spiderman 2* is a superhero, yes, but he's also human, struggling between work and love, like all of us, depressed because he's made an impossible choice and has lost his powers.)
3. While some scripts may begin with types—the geek, the gang member, the private eye—you must begin immediately to create *individualizing details* that work *against* that type, deepening character complexity and creating surprise at every turn.
4. If you start with the most specifically detailed individual character, time and setting, you'll end up writing the *most universal* story.
5. I'll say it again: The more general, the more you frustrate and bore your reader. The more specific, the more universal.

A specific character in a specific time and place with a specific set of troubles is an individual who's compelling, active and not passive, someone who chooses, well or badly, someone you have to know more about. Such characters are often people under incredible stress with difficult choices who often choose wrongly and must suffer the consequences.

Take J. J. Gittes, 35, a private investigator in 1940s California, for example. He's almost drowned in a storm sewer and just lost one of his favorite wing-tip Florsheim shoes; a guy with a switchblade half his height has just sliced open his nostril like a persimmon; he suspects that someone's diverting water from L. A., poisoning farmers' wells, running them off their land and making a killing; and the woman he's been sleeping with, Evelyn Mulwray, the wife of a recently murdered water company executive, has been lying to him all along . . . .

Dramatized summaries must be both specific *and* dramatic, conveying surprising details and surprising turns or changes in character and events that compel producers and script agents to say, "I have to read this script now. I have to know what happens next, the how and the why."

Think about the films you admire the most: They make you jump in your dark theater seat, cover your eyes, weep or laugh, then say: “I can’t believe that just happened!” or “I can’t believe she just did that!”

But then—and this is the important part—after a few moments or days or weeks, you look back through the film, or go to see it again and again, watching how the writer has sets up each surprise like a gymnasium full of dominos set to fall, and you say, “But, of course, that’s the only thing that *could* have happened. That’s exactly what *that* character *would* have done.”

The most powerful and memorable films—even silly comedies—are both surprising *and* inevitable. And you want to capture that sense of surprising inevitability in your pitch, treatment and synopsis. The key—and the hard part—is doing so in *as few words as possible*.

### **How to Use Details that *Show***

You might be asking yourself right about now how you can possibly show (*and* tell) your story in three sentences? One page? Ten pages?

It’s a good question, the reason why writing excellent dramatized summaries can be difficult and may take many focusing drafts. But the answer to the question is simple: *Use surprising significant details*.

In a letter to his longtime friend, Alexander Suvorin, short story writer Anton Chekhov writes that *if you want to give the sense of a moonlit night, show the glow of the full moon flashing from a piece of broken glass and a black dog in the shadows of the milldam*.

In other words, the writer, rather than describing the entire scene detail by detail, simply chooses two or three *surprising, vivid* details—*significant details*—to stand for the whole scene, giving the reader a broad sense of setting, mood, character and even theme.

(For those of you who study poetry, this technique is a familiar figure of speech known as *synecdoche*, in which a part stands for a whole, an individual stands for a class or a race or an entire society. Take a look at your own family. Is your mother a dictator? Is your father a Napoleon, a Stalin or a Jefferson (even Jefferson had his dark secrets)? The sharper the detail, the better the metaphor, though you’re leaving your metaphor’s meaning *unstated*. That’s the beauty of images, and films are *all about images*.)

According to *Screenplay: Writing the Picture*, even dramatized summaries must show “only what we can see or hear,” describing characters and locations with “picture-making words,” trimming adjectives (*nervous*), adverbs (*nervously*) and clichés (*sweating, tapping fingers on the desk*) that tell (that is, *describe your*

*interpretation of the character's emotions or show the character's reactions in an unsurprising way*) and instead use concrete actions and similes and metaphors that show *in a surprising way* a character or action.

Think of the scene toward the end of the second act of *Chinatown*, for example: J. J. (Jake) Gittes knows that Evelyn Mulwray has been lying to him throughout the entire film, and he suspects she might have killed her husband. Finally, toward the end of Act Two, after he's fallen in love with her, he's become so fed up with her duplicity he demands: Who is that young woman upstairs? Tell me *now*, he says and slaps her. "She's my daughter," Evelyn says. He slaps her again. "She's my sister." He slaps her once more, pushes her down, knocking over a table. "She's my daughter *and* my sister," she says. "Don't you see?"

In this famous scene, we discover, along with Jake, the reason why Evelyn's been lying: Because she's had a child by her own father and she's trying to protect her child from him, a man who might just do exactly what he did to his daughter to his granddaughter. More important, as surprised—even appalled—as we are by this discovery, we understand finally and say, "Of course."

But how does Robert Towne show that Evelyn Mulwray is nervous? Lying?

With a few surprising details that trust us to see and to judge, Towne writes another brilliant scene earlier in Act 1: In Gittes' office, Evelyn casually lies—she's a good liar, too—then opens her silver cigarette case and gets out a cigarette, lighting it up, her fingers trembling, and she refuses to look Gittes in the eye.

"You've got another one lit," Gittes says, and, sure enough, two cigarettes smolder in the ashtray.

In a moment, we know she's hiding something because *Gittes* knows and his actions *show* us he knows.

### **Suggestions for Writing Dramatized Summaries**

Here are a few suggestions for writing dramatized summaries, with a few examples:

1. Summarize everything *in scene*, *only what we can see and hear*.
2. Don't write background or exposition: "Gittes, the son of a construction worker, had a hard life, peeling potatoes in the local deli until he was twenty-seven. He met his first wife . . . ."
3. Summarize only what's important for each scene or act, no extraneous material, background or exposition (your interpretations of character or a character's history).

4. Don't tell us character's thoughts or feelings *unless they tell them to someone else*, but . . .
5. Also avoid obvious exposition through dialogue: Like you, your characters rarely have long monologues or tell their life stories or reveal their motivations or their deepest hurts or secrets, except when they share an extreme conflict with someone they trust deeply.
6. Slip in exposition and background information *only when we need it* through summarized scenes that *show conflict*.
7. Write *only* in present tense; scripts, pitches, treatments and synopses all occur in the *eternal present*, the eternal moment of each scene, frozen in celluloid or pixels:  
     "Gittes dials his black phone."
8. Don't write in past tense: "Gittes dialed his black phone."
9. Don't mess up your sequence of tenses:  
     **Incorrect:** "Gittes' secretary tells him Mrs. Mulwray had been (or was) waiting over an hour."  
     **Correct:** "Gittes' secretary tells him Mrs. Mulwray has been waiting over an hour."
10. In dramatic summaries, instead of using direct dialogue, use *indirect* dialogue, using "that" constructions instead of quotation marks.  
     **Correct:** She tells Gittes [that] Mrs. Mulwray's waiting.
11. Make sure your indirect dialogue *sounds like* direct dialogue—that is, it *hints at the voice of the characters*, even uses contractions and their actual words, but without the quotation marks:  
     "Gittes' secretary hands him an envelope. It's from Mrs. Mulray, his secretary says. Urgent. Then she tells him Mrs. Mulwray's been waiting for over an hour."
12. Save direct dialogue for *only* your best lines, the ones that shine:  
     "She's my sister. She's my daughter. She's my sister *and* my daughter."
13. Write as concisely as you can, using standard *Subject, Verb/Subject Verb Object* constructions as the *cores* of your sentences, with as many variations as you'd like:  
     "Next to Gittes, Mrs. Mulwray sleeps, the sheets rumped around her bare ankles."  
     "Gittes reaches for a cigarette on the nightstand, lights it up, the match sulfur flaring in his eyes."
14. Avoid *Subject, Linking Verb* constructions; combine predicate adjectives and nouns into one sentence.  
     **Clunky and wordy—tells, doesn't show:** "Gittes is a private detective. He lives in Los Angeles. He's 35. It's 1946. It's just after the Second World War II. He's driving down the street. It's obvious that he doesn't care if he breaks the law."  
     **Better:** "Gittes, 35, a private detective in post-war L. A., drives his '42 Packard through a stoplight, a driver swerving to a stop in the intersection and HONKING, cursing Gittes through his open window."

15. Avoid these sentence-starting “is” verbs:

- “It is/There is.”

**Clunky and wordy—tells, doesn’t show:** “It’s clear the driver is a fool.”

**Better—shows, doesn’t tell:** “The driver beats his head against the steering wheel.”

- Progressive verbs (“is” + a verb + “ing”) *unless* they show a progressive action:

**Clunky and wordy:** “Gittes is driving on. He’s laughing.”

**Better:** “Gittes drives on, laughing.”

**Correct Progressive Action:** Gittes is driving by the Los Angeles Water Department building when he spots Mrs. Mulwray running down the steps.”

- Passive-voice verbs (“is” + an “-ed” verb + the implied or stated object of the preposition “by”).

**Clunky and wordy:** “Gittes’ nostril is cut open by a goofy little thug until it bleeds.”

**Better:** “A short man in a fedora and double-breasted suit presses his switchblade up inside Gittes’ nostril, then flicks it, blood spattering Gittes’ fingers as he covers his nose.”

16. Don’t stack adjectives, especially when they’re redundant, especially when they tell us you’re overwriting, over-reaching:

“A tiny, short, stumpy little thug cuts Gittes’ nostril wide open, bright red blood spurting out like ketchup on a rose.”

17. Avoid adjectives and other words that describe *your feelings or judgments* rather than describe *what we see and hear*.

“Gittes, *cynical* and *calculating*, refuses to put up with *lies*, especially from *corrupt* politicians, *gangsters* and *thugs*.”

For more specific suggestions, please refer to the pitch, treatment and synopsis assignments. If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to ask.

**A little film fact:** The short guy who cuts Gittes’ nose in *Chinatown* is also the director, Roman Polanski.

Polanski had a knife specially made so that it hinged downward and wouldn’t actually cut Jack Nicholson’s nostril, but just as Polanski started filming the scene, he was so distracted by his job as director, he held the knife upside down. Nicholson, feeling no give and the sharp blade’s edge, jerked the knife out of Polanski’s hand and turned it over the right way.

“Jeez, Rome,” Nicholson said, “you trying to cut off my nose?”

Then they shot the scene.