

Module 2: The Ackerman Scenogram: Creating a Visual Map of Your Script

What you need to do before you fill in your Scenogram:

1. Read “Introduction to Dramatized Stories” and “The Pitch.”
2. Read “A Few Notes on Script Structure.”
3. Pitch your script idea to friends, family and trusted acquaintances to find out what you need to clarify and develop about your script story. Try to pitch the story, capturing the essence of your story idea, in as few words as possible.
4. Break down your story into discernable turning points: the most important changes, the most important sequences and scenes. It may take you several hours, but it will save you countless hours of frustration in the future.
5. Write a draft or two of your Pitch, just to get started.

Ackerman Scenogram: Definition

The Ackerman Scenogram, shown below, is adapted here from UCLA Screenwriting Professor Hal Ackerman’s original design, a *visual representation of your script’s inciting incident, exposition, unifying devices, act and sequence structure and major turning points*:

The Ackerman Scenogram (Adapted from Hal Ackerman, UCLA)					
Title and Author _____					
Exposition	Unifying Devices				

Act I Title	ACT I	Act II Title	ACT II	Act III Title	ACT III
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
ACT I	ACT II	ACT III			
Inciting Incident					

The Purposes of the Scenogram

I highly recommend that you take your Scenogram through several drafts *as you write your pitch, going back and forth between the Pitch and the Scenogram* as you focus *and* condense your story and story structure.

The Scenogram is designed to help you:

1. Create a visual map of your script, from beginning to end;
2. Fill in, with greater and greater concision and significant detail, the major turning points and dramatic elements of your script;
3. Define and write your Pitch through several drafts before you turn in them for workshop discussion;
4. Workshop—as a group—the Pitches and Scenograms to help you clarify and sharpen your story even more for your final submission;
5. Revise and rewrite both assignments for a grade.

The Flexibility of the Pitch and Scenogram Assignments

The Pitch and Scenogram are intended to be written *together* through several refining drafts, and they *will probably* change as you develop your story and deepen your characters. *You don't have to stick with your scenographic maps or original stories, especially if you discover something surprising about your characters or stories along the way.*

The Scenogram is intended *only as a guide* to help you write your treatments and scripts; if you decide that they no longer serve your purposes, *rewrite them again* so that you'll have a better idea how your story idea has evolved. It's better to write something short (less time-consuming and risky) than to find out you've made a wrong turn after writing twenty pages and you have to throw them out.

If you believe you're doing things backwards—writing “maps” or “outlines” of your script idea instead of the script itself—please keep in mind: Just as it's helpful to have a map before you set out for a long trip to L. A. or New York, it's also helpful to have a map of your story, just in case you get lost.

If you decide during the journey of writing of your treatment and script that you want to take a side road—a road *essential* to discovering and deepening your story—then you simply change your map to fit your journey of discovery. If you don't surprise yourself, you won't surprise us, and your first idea will probably not be your best idea.

Instructions for Writing the Scenogram

Fill in the “Scenogram.doc” file with as much detail as space will allow, focusing on major turning points, reversals in character and audience expectation. If possible, try to keep the entire Scenogram to one page; that is, if the Scenogram wraps to another page, work on revising to make your sentences tighter and

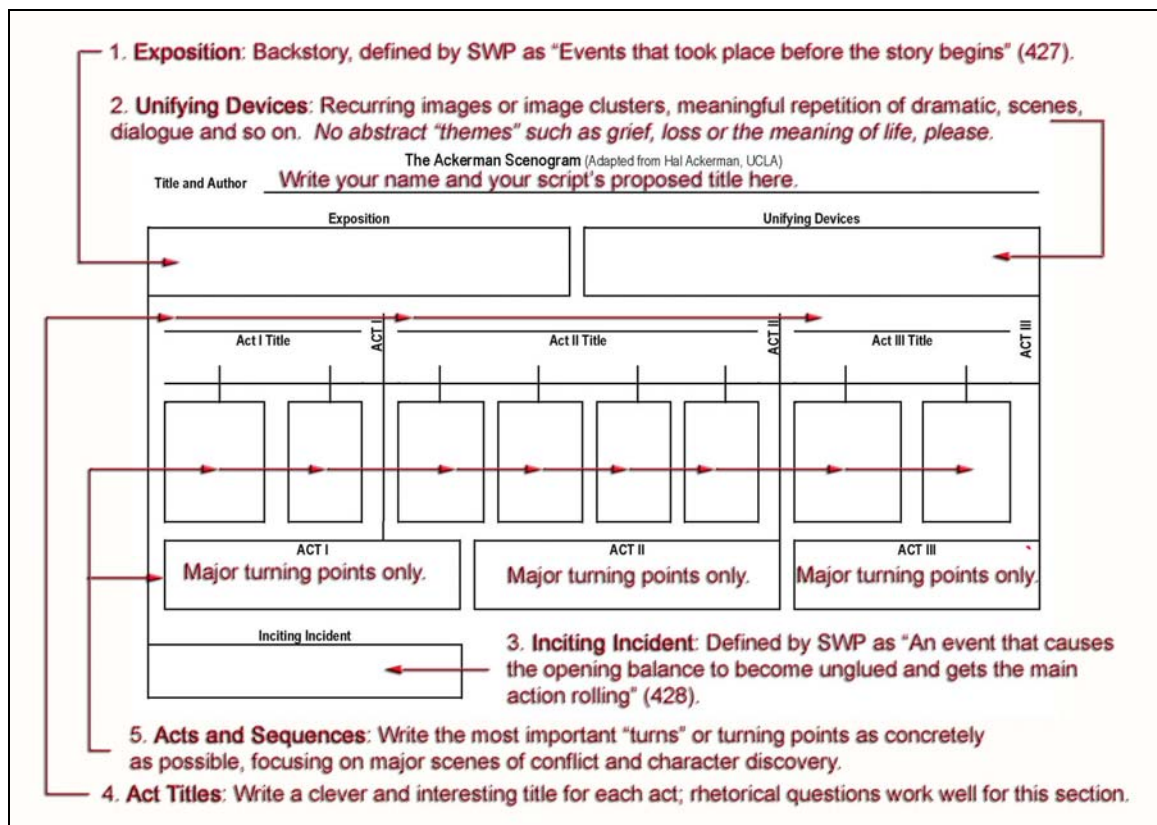
more concise. You don't have to sacrifice clarity and sharpness of detail if you *write the significant details of your story briefly*.

Elements of the Scenogram

If you're unfamiliar with screenwriting terms such as *exposition*, *obligatory scene* and *act*, now may be a good time to take a look at SWP's glossary of terms (427-430).

The Scenogram makes one significant assumption that may not be true of your script as you write it: *Not all scripts have three acts*. Even so, trying to fit your story into the standard three-act structure can be a useful *starting point*, and it helps to keep things simple in the early stages of story development.

The Scenogram below describes each element in detail, followed by more detailed definitions and explanations of each element as well as a sample Scenogram for *Chinatown*:



1. Exposition

- *Backstory*, defined by SWP as "Events that took place before the story begins" (427), may include background information *important to your story* about childhood events or events in the recent past, *brief but important life stories of characters that clarify their motives*. Since

exposition and backstory are usually boring and obvious when delivered by themselves (say, from writers who want to give a character's life story at the beginning of the script, in exposition through dialogue), skilled writers deliver exposition *only in the most dramatic moments* and *only when a character's backstory is needed*. For example, we discover in exposition that Evelyn Mulwray has had a child by her own father *only* when she has pushed Jake to the limits with her lies, *only* when Jake needs to know *what's really going on*. Exposition, especially exposition through dialogue, is best administered in small doses spread out through the script—*only in conflict* and *only when it's needed*—but it may be essential to understanding a character's motives. Most excellent scripts are primarily *explorations of motive*—the *whys* of scripts—and it's your job to know *when* and *how* to deliver it. (For more information about *exposition* and *backstory*, refer to the *SWP* index and 53-55, 73, 243, 253, 277-280 and 302.)

2. Unifying Devices:

- This term is somewhat vague and abstract, but it refers mostly to *surprising recurring images* important to a film story, such as the floating grocery bag in *American Beauty* or Hollis Mulwray's broken bifocals in *Chinatown*. (I've listed others in the *Chinatown* Scenogram below.) Focus only on *meaningful concrete images and objects* in this box, including, if necessary, what Alfred Hitchcock refers to as the MacGuffin:

an element in the story that motivates the action of the story, but that in and of itself may or may not have a real effect on the story; it's the excuse for the action. For example, in the *Maltese Falcon*, it is the statue of the falcon; in *North by Northwest*, it is the microfilm hidden in the pre-Columbian statue; in the movie *Mission Impossible*, it is the computer disk with the list of agents" (*SWP*, 429). (For more examples read the rest of the description in the *SWP* Glossary.)

3. The Inciting Incident:

- Defined by *SWP* as "An event that causes the opening balance to become unglued and gets the main action rolling" (428), the inciting incident is usually an abrupt change or *complete reversal* in a character's "normal" life that causes serious trouble and conflict:
 - Mrs. Kramer, 35, abandons her neglectful husband and her son (*Kramer vs. Kramer*)
 - Conrad, 18, returns home from a mental hospital after cutting his wrists (*Ordinary People*)

- a merciless cyborg, half-human and half-machine, travels from the future to the present day to assassinate the mother of a future rebel leader (*The Terminator*)
- a woman posing as Evelyn Mulwray, 32, hires J. J. Gittes to find the girl who's allegedly having an affair with Mrs. Mulwray's husband (*Chinatown*).

Remember:

1. The inciting Incident usually occurs early in the first act.
2. Only trouble is interesting, so . . .
3. The more trouble you can get your main character into, the better, especially if the trouble is the result of an important decision.
4. The more the character's troubles increase—escalating conflicts and obstacles to the character's desire—the more likely the character, under extreme pressure, will be forced to make difficult, often impossible choices with life-changing consequences.

For more information about the Inciting Incident, refer to *SWP*, 90, 98 and 428.

4. Act Titles:

- Giving each act a tentative title—usually in the form of a dramatic rhetorical question—can help clarify that act's major dramatic thrust:
 - Will Kramer's wife return to her husband and son? Will Kramer become a better father? Will Kramer lose custody of his son?
 - Will Conrad try to kill himself again? Will his therapist help him understand why he's suicidal? Will Conrad's mother—and Conrad himself—ever find forgiveness for the death of her favorite son?
 - Will the Terminator kill Sarah Connor and defeat the future rebels? Can the man who's come to save Sarah fight and destroy the invincible Terminator? Can Sarah save herself and change the world from an apocalyptic future?

5. Acts and Sequences

- Scripts are often divided into smaller and smaller dramatic units:
Script → Acts → Sequences → Scenes → Beats
- The Scenogram should focus on *only* the major turning points of the largest two units, *Acts* and *Sequences*. In the *Act* boxes, write the major turning points *of each act* as concretely and concisely as possible:
 - I. The Terminator kills innocents as he hunts down Sarah while a madman who says he's from the future tries to save her.
 - II. Falling in love, Sarah realizes she's the key to saving the human race and fights back.

- III. Sarah defeats the Terminator but, now pregnant, loses her lover and prepares alone for the coming storm.
- The separate boxes above each Act box refer to the main turning points of the script's *Sequences*. Fill these in as concisely and specifically as possible. Even if the number of sequence boxes does not correspond exactly to the numbers of sequences per act you have in mind, please fill them in as best as you can, trying to show the turning points of each sequence.
- If you have trouble deciding what to write, think of the most important reversals in each sequence.
 - The Terminator arrives, kills Sarah's roommate and tries to kill Sarah in a nightclub when a mysterious madman saves her.

While the Scenogram has very little room in each box to fill in the details, try to be as specific as possible and avoid cutting words that may confuse a reader. For example, please avoid *telegraphic style* (Am arriving at airport at 4 p. m. Will take cab.) This approach simply confuses readers and makes for difficult reading. I've made it possible in Word for you to drag boxes to make them larger and wider to fit your text; they're also formatted in ten-point rather than twelve point fonts to give you more space. Again, try to get as much detail in as you can on one page.

When you've filled in your Scenogram, you'll find it useful to write and refine your pitch through several drafts as well. The more you revise toward greater concision and significant detail in both assignments, the more effective the writing will be and the better your grade will be for each assignment.

Admittedly, these are difficult assignments to do well for some, but the more you work on them, the clearer you'll be about your own story.

On the following page you'll find a sample *Chinatown* Scenogram just to help you get an idea about how to approach your own Scenogram.

The Ackerman Scenogram (Adapted from Hal Ackerman, UCLA)

Author and Title Robert Towne's *Chinatown*

Exposition

J. J. Gittes used to work with Escobar until he tried to help a woman in Chinatown who "got hurt," and he quit the force, became a P. I. Mulwray fought with Cross over building a new dam because he wanted the water to belong to the people of L.A., and the previous dam burst and killed hundreds of people. Mrs. Cross loses his bifocals when he drowns Mulwray in his tide pool. Cross is intimidating landowners and diverting water to land outside L. A. which he's buying under the names of dead people from the Albacore Club. Cross plans to make the land part of L.A. and to make a fortune. Mulwray has had a child by her own father and wants to protect her daughter from Cross's doing the same thing all over again.

Unifying Devices

Water in the desert: fresh and salt (the flooding creek, the Pacific, storm sewers and dry gulches, Mulwray's tide pool, "bad for glass," salt water in Mulwray's lungs), Jake's nose, the broken bifocals (Mulwray's? Cross's?) Broken watches and taillights. Chinatown itself.

