

## Writing Module Three: The Treatment

### Assignment Preparation:

What need to do before writing your treatment for this course:

1. Read *Screenplay: Writing the Picture*, “Giving Them the Treatment” (367-376).
2. Reread [Introduction to Dramatized Summaries](#) and follow the guidelines closely.
3. Reread the [Chinatown treatment](#) and use it as a guide to writing your own treatment.
  - Note: We won’t be writing a teleplay script or a step outline like the examples given in *SWP*, so please use the *Chinatown* treatment I’ve supplied as your *primary* guide for formatting, content and methods of creating a dramatized summary and scenes. Like actual pitches used in the film industry, real industry treatments are almost impossible to find, so I’ve created the *Chinatown* sample treatment from a step outline I found online to help you see what a treatment looks like. It’s a good example, I think, though not without its flaws, and *it doesn’t always follow the guidelines for treatments I’ve listed below.*

### Assignment Goals:

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

1. Write a clear, concise and compelling treatment of your own script story.
2. Write and revise toward greater concision, using more significant detail and sharpening the focus of your story as you revise, expanding *and* contracting the story’s when necessary.
3. Workshop your treatment through one workshopped draft and revise it for a grade.

## The Treatment

*Screenwriting: Writing the Picture* defined a treatment as “A prose narrative (five to twenty-five pages long) that recounts the events in a propose script or movie” (430).

For the purposes of this class the treatment will be:

1. A dramatized summary, *no less than more eight pages* long and *no more than ten.*
2. A story-development tool to help you expand, develop and focus your story in greater detail than your pitch and Ackerman Scenogram.

3. Designed—along with the pitch and Scenogram—to help you focus and further develop your script story *scenically* through two treatment drafts.
4. Somewhat like a short story in its use of significant detail and quick cuts from scene to scene, except that most of the actual dialogue is summarized as *indirect* dialogue. Only the most important lines of *direct* dialogue—like “Velly bad for glass” in the *Chinatown* treatment—will actually use quotation marks.
5. Often used by busy script development companies, online script sites, agents and producers interested in reading a short dramatized summary of the script before they spend the time and effort necessary to read an entire script.
6. Due toward the end of “Act One” of this course—depending on the schedule I created at the beginning of class, the first treatment for workshop discussion due within the first month of this course.
7. Due by email to me no later than *one* week before your assigned workshop date.
8. Workshopped individually, two to four per week (depending on class size) for several weeks, then rewritten for a grade, then posted when we’ve workshopped everyone’s treatments once.
9. Helpful for creating a more detailed map of your script to save you the time and trouble of writing the entire script and discovering you’ve gotten off track early on.
10. Flexible and changeable: You don’t have to stick with your original treatment as you rewrite it and your script. In fact, the treatment *will* change as you develop and deepen your story and characters, and that’s okay.

### **The Structure of the Treatment**

Since most scripts and films consist of three major acts (turning points or reversals), your treatment will focus not only on the major turning points of each *act* but also on the “smaller” turning points and reversals *sequence by sequence*, *scene by scene* and *beat by beat*. In other words, you’ll be writing a dramatized summary of the most important scenes in your script and showing with greater significant detail than the pitch *what we see and hear* from scene to scene.

A quote from the film industry might be useful here: “No scene that doesn’t turn.” If you find yourself summarizing a scene that’s undramatic, conveying only exposition or back story, chances are it’s unnecessary. Deliver all the backstory and exposition of your story *through conflict*. When I set out to write a story, I try to have *at least three things* going on in each scene, elevating more than one conflict and slipping in exposition only when the audience needs it. Writing scenes this way is difficult and time consuming but ultimately rewarding.

Just as you’ll probably have *major reversals* at the ends of acts one, two and three, you’ll also want to have *minor reversals* occurring *from scene to scene* and

from *beat to beat within scenes*. The essence of every beat, scene, sequence and act is conflict in an escalating series of events that raise the stakes like steps up a long set of stairs.

The best advice I can give you is this: Get your major character in trouble and then make it worse and worse. Only conflict is interesting. Throw the weight of circumstance *against* your favored character, and you'll probably have a compelling story. If you can't figure out where to go next, just make the main character's struggles worse, and then you'll be back on track.

Write about what you know, using some interesting expertise you already have—scuba diving, butterfly collecting—or write about what you *don't* know, making yourself an expert in what you whatever subject you want to write about by researching your subject carefully enough that another expert in that field will believe your script. If you're writing a story about a fireman who almost perishes in the World Trade Center and you've never been to New York City, you may want to write about something closer to your own experience *or* take several trips to New York to interview firemen who survived the attacks of 9/11. Authenticity is everything. I once wrote a story about a rattlesnake that blinked, until I gave the story to a herpetologist, who said, "Nice story, guy, but snakes don't have eyelids."

Try to have conflicts arise from character choice rather than cooked-up "plot points," accidents or coincidences. (If you're going to end your script with a man in a wheel chair and a puppy in his lap being run over by a train, set it up, and just keep in mind that such an ending is most appropriate for a *comedy*.) Likewise, resist the temptation to kill off your main character. It's hard for a story to go on with a major character dead, unless you're writing *Sunset Boulevard* or *American Beauty* all over again. The best approach is to force your major point-of-view character to make difficult, almost impossible, choices at each turn, especially *wrong* choices, and then let the consequences of those choices play out like dominoes falling.

### **A Few Practical Guidelines for the Writing the Treatment**

- As with your script, please follow these formatting guidelines carefully:
  - The FIRST TIME your CHARACTERS appear in the treatment, try to do *all three things listed below in one sentence*:
    1. Include their FIRST AND LAST NAMES IN CAPS: CONSTANTINE GRUBER. (Don't capitalize or use their full names again unless they enter then story much later and we need to be reminded who they are, like CURLY in *Chinatown*.)
    2. Include the character's age as a simple numeral set off by commas (JERROL BURBLE, 29, a hairy man with a mole in his eyebrow like a baby June bug . . .) A numeral (13) saves you and the reader time *and* space.

3. Include a *brief but surprising* description of the character:
  - *Don't write* a general description that gives your value judgments about the character (*beautiful, ugly, cranky, goofy, racist*); such adjectives tell and don't show;
  - *Don't write* a boring all-points-bulletin (5' 4" with brown eyes and hair); but instead
  - Choose *two or three significant details* that give us a vivid picture of the character immediately: *a pear-shaped man with a strawberry nose and a weepy, open sore on his leg.* (This description, something like the one Chaucer uses in "The Cook's Tale," vividly *shows* the alcoholic cook in *Canterbury Tales*. The strawberry nose *shows* us he drinks too much and the open sore strikes us as *grotesque* and *unsanitary*, especially since the cook keeps picking at his sore while he cooks meals.)
  - Here's an example of a sentence that uses all three elements: "JOSEPHINE (JO) CRUPKI, 73, enters the living room in her granddaughter's red miniskirt, wild-eyed, looking like a skeleton dipped in latex." Hard to forget this description, right?
- Write scenes in *specific places* and *times* with *clear transitions* from scene to scene: "The next day," "Two weeks later," "After burying the body," for example.
- Write *only what we can see or hear*. Don't tell us character's thoughts or motivations. Have the characters tell other characters what they're thinking and reveal their motives through their dialogue and actions.
- Don't write "we see" or "we hear." Keep *us* out of the treatment and script altogether. If you write, "We see Jo pulling a revolver from her cleavage," simply rewrite the sentence as, "Jo pulls a Colt 45 from her cleavage."
- Every time a character *makes* or *hears* a sound, CAPITALIZE that SOUND: "Jo BLOWS out the television screen with a SHATTERING GUNSHOT."
- Don't write camera directions. We just want to see and hear the story as it unfolds dramatically like a film in our minds. The more *vivid and brief* the descriptions, the better.

Each of you will have a chance to write two drafts of your treatments. We'll workshop the first so that you'll have enough concrete suggestions and questions to revise and develop your characters and storyline more.

### **The Importance of Meeting Your Deadlines**

At the beginning of the semester, I'll assign a set of randomizing numbers associated with your names in a spreadsheet which I'll recalculate for *each* weekly workshop we have for treatments and scripts. From the randomized numbers I've generated early in the semester, I'll fill in deadline slots for each of you to have your work critiqued in synchronous and asynchronous workshops. I will then convert your treatments or scripts into Adobe Acrobat and send them to the other students in the class for comments, which they must return to me by four p.m. the day before we're supposed to have our synchronous workshops.

It's absolutely essential that you email me your treatments or scripts ***no later than four p. m. the week before the synchronous workshop dates I've assigned.*** This deadline will allow everyone in the workshop enough time to read and make *concrete and helpful* comments on your treatment, raising questions about what's not clear, for example, with sufficient time for me to merge all the comments into one document for synchronous and asynchronous workshops. (Students with slow internet connections or without the technology needed for synchronous workshops will still be required to make comments on the treatments and to make at least five comments on asynchronous workshop discussion boards.)

Remember your deadlines for submitting for workshop and for the workshops themselves. If you're not sure what your deadlines are, check the course calendar and weekly announcements, or ask me.

If you can't meet your deadlines for a legitimate reason, please let me know as soon as you possibly can so I can make other arrangements. Writers who miss their deadlines may expect that lateness to reflect in their final grades. Also remember: If you're up for a synchronous workshop but can't participate in it because you don't have the technology or internet speed to do so, let me know, and our discussions of your work will take place *only* on discussion boards that week.

Depending on the class size, we'll discuss two to four treatments and scripts per week. Students who have treatments and scripts scheduled early have to write their treatments more quickly but more time to rewrite after workshops, and those who have them scheduled late will have more time to write them before submitting them but less time to revise. It's a trade off I don't much like, but it's the best I can do under the circumstances.

What's important is that everyone write his or her treatment as early as possible, avoiding procrastinating until the last minute. If you begin writing early, you'll have more time to make your scripts work for you before you send them out for comments and workshops.