FUNDAMENTAL SCREENWRITING PRACTICES AND HOW TO APPLY THEM TO INDEPENDENT FILMMAKING

STORIES FOR THE SCREEN

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STORIES FOR THE SCREEN

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Welcome to Stories for the screen. In this workbook, you will discover fundamental screenwriting practices and how to apply them to independent filmmaking.

 If you have worked on films before, have written your own story, or if this is your first time being exposed to storytelling and screenwriting techniques, this is a great guide for any experience level.

DO YOU...?

**LIKE FILMS?
LIKE TO WRITE?
WANT TO LEARN BEST
PRACTICES IN WRITING A
SCRIPT?**

THEN THIS DIY IS FOR YOU!

"STORYTELLING IS THE MOST POWERFUL WAY TO PUT IDEAS INTO THE WORLD TODAY." - ROBERT MCKEE
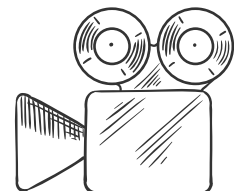
1.OVERVIEW

Chapter Goals:

Determine why stories are important

Compare how screenplays get translated to the screen

Reflect and write 1-3 paragraphs about your own major life experience

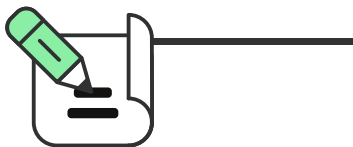Review the topics we will be covering in this presentation

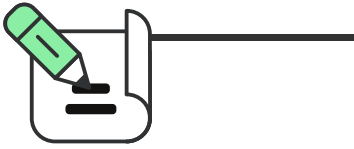**HOOK PROMPT:**

WHY DO STORIES MATTER?

Here is a hook question for you: why do stories matter? this is an opener format we will be using for all of the different topics in this DIY. Answer the question as best you can below.
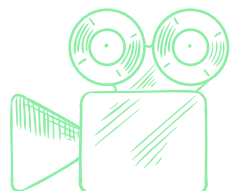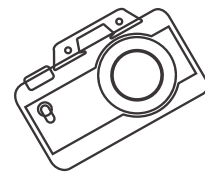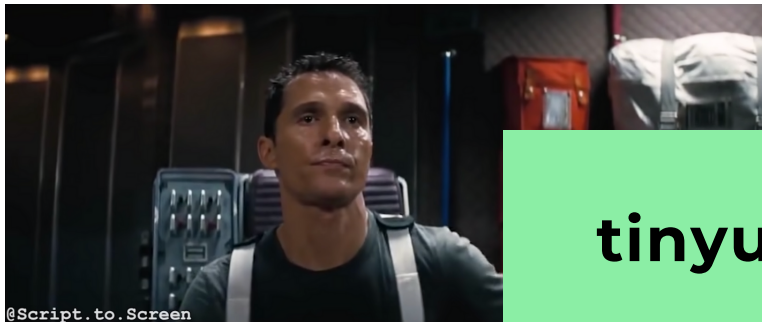
Write your response below.

NOTES

Chantal's response: I believe stories are important because they help us learn more about ourselves.

ACTIVITY PROMPT:

Interstellar (2017)

tinyurl.com/3v4fcvku

For our first activity, we will take a look at two popular films and their respective screenplays.

Get Out (2017)

tinyurl.com/1mnd3jlm

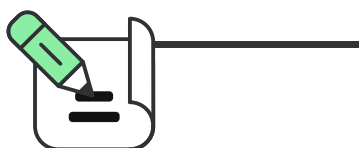**As you watch, pay attention to the dialogue and the actions.**

What are some things that stood out to you? What was left out or added?

CONTENT WARNING: The first film, *Get Out*, is an R-rated film and pertains to themes featuring the loss of a parent.
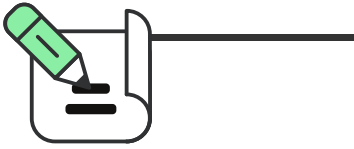
REFLECTION:

# WRITE ABOUT AN EXPERIENCE THAT CHANGED YOU

Think about an experience in your life that changed you. When thinking of stories, it is a great practice to draw from your own experiences.

Write your answers, notes, and reflections here.

NOTES

Having a strong story is an important part of making a film work. Identifying what makes stories work and how they are made are a key part in making a film.
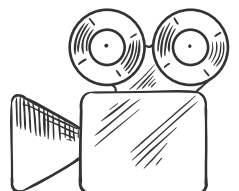
"THE HUMAN SPECIES THINKS IN METAPHORS AND LEARNS THROUGH STORIES." - MARY CATHERINE BATESON

2. BREAKING DOWN STORY: WHAT SHOULD YOUR STORY INCLUDE?

Chapter Goals:

Review keywords and definitions for plot, character, acts, beat sheets, treatments, dialogue, and world-building

Describe your world to examine how worldbuilding functions Review popular story structures and templates for developing your story

Write an outline of your own story from beginning to end
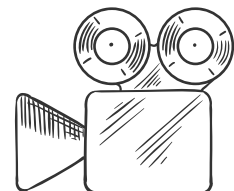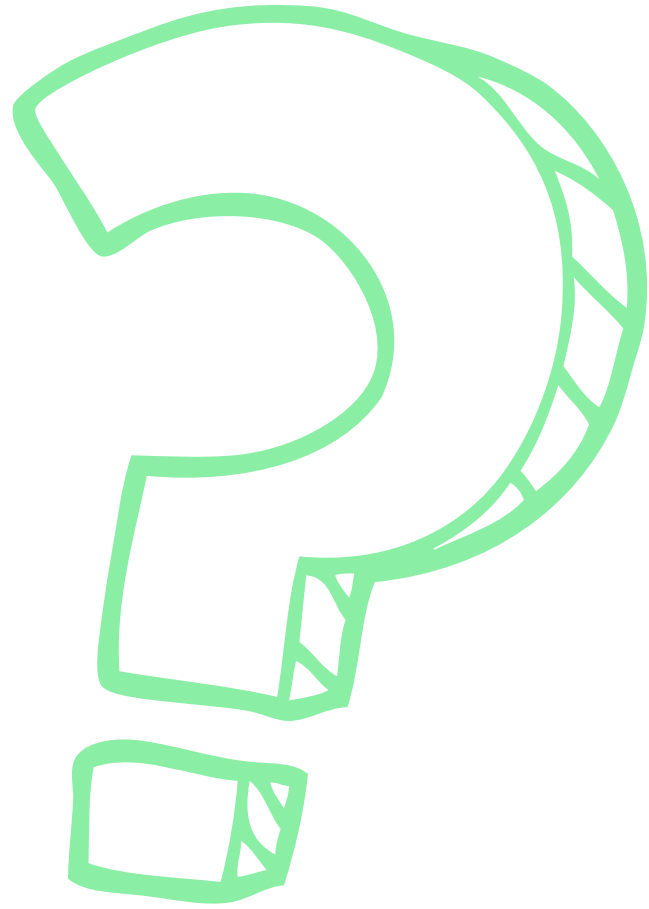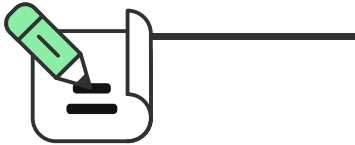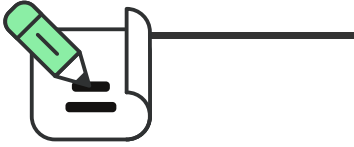
HOOK PROMPT:

WHAT MAKES A STORY?

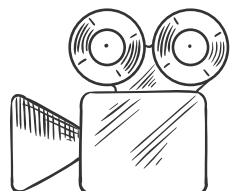**What makes a story? What are elements found in stories??**

Write your response below.

NOTES

There are common key elements that are found in most stories. Come up with as many as you can!

CHARACTERS

Characters are a key element to your story. They operate in your world and are generally what moves the story forward. The decisions they make are what your story is about.

Amelie Poulain from *Amelie* (2001)

Little from *Moonlight* (2018)

Luke Skywalker from *Star Wars (1979, 1985, 2019, etc)*

The decisions your characters make are core parts of your story. Among your characters, you will have the following:

TYPES OF CHARACTERS

Protagonist

The main character or protagonist. This person drives the story forward and makes choices that determine the outcome of your story. The protagonist usually changes for the better by the end of the story.
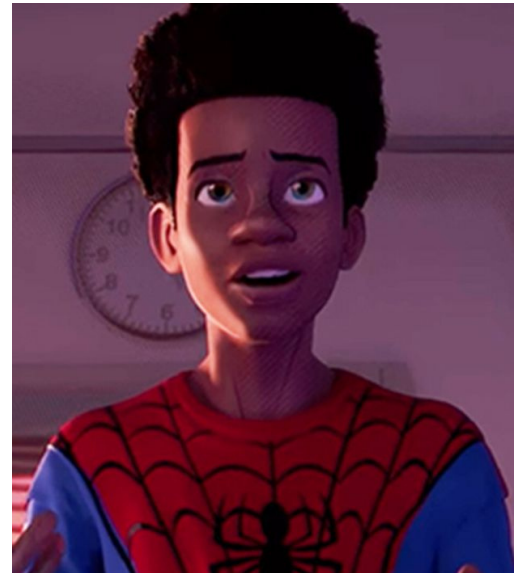
Antagonist

Known as the villain or the person(s) who threaten(s) the protagonist and their goal. This character usually doesn't change.

Supporting Characters

There are also supporting characters who help the protagonist or antagonist along the way. Joseph's Campbell's "The Hero's Journey" gives us several examples of this.
We will get into what the Hero's Journey is later.
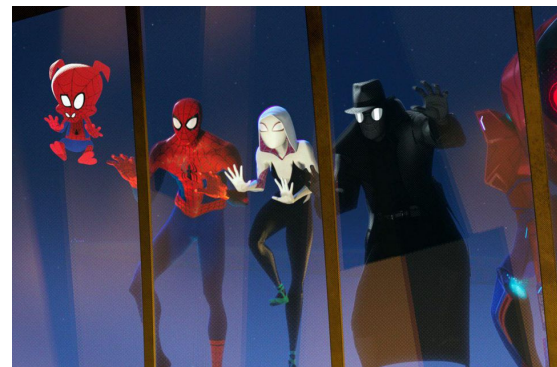
Images from *Spiderman: Into the Spiderverse* (2018)

DIALOGUE

What is spoken in the story? **Dialogue** is an element used in many stories. Dialogue can be used to create tension, tell us about the characters, help us learn more about what will happen next. For dialogue to be effective, avoid using dialogue to tell your entire story. A popular saying is "show don't tell." The dialogue should also be realistic.

Toy Story (1995)

Screenwriter and playwright David Mamet, says, "A good film script should be able to do completely without dialogue." This is an important perspective as you write your own screenplay. Your dialogue should not tell the story for you, but enhance all the parts of your story.

ACTIVITY PROMPT:
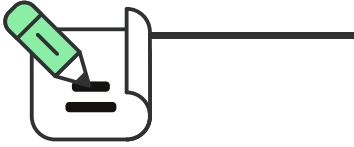
LISTEN AND WRITE DIALOGUE

Let's do an activity. For believable dialogue, a good practice many screenwriters use is to listen to real-life conversations to capture the rhythm of how people interact.

Choose an area where you can listen to a conversation. Write down what you notice about the conversation. If safe to do so, write down what is being said.
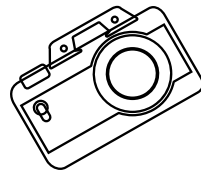
Write your observations here.
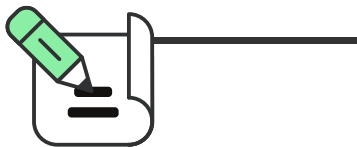
NOTES

This exercise should not be an invasion of privacy, but a way to listen closely to real conversations. Listening to language helps with writing realistic dialogue.

WORLDBUILDING

Worldbuilding is your setting. Why do you think worldbuilding is important? Knowing the world you're writing about gives a strong sense of place and when used well, can be a character in itself...
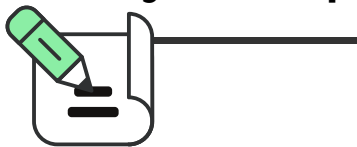

Nightmare Before Christmas (2010)

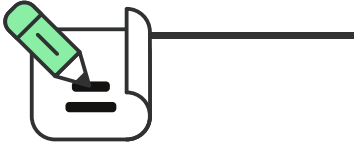*Room 2015)*

ACTIVITY PROMPT:

WHERE YOU LIVE/ WHERE YOU GREW UP

Write some information about where you currently live or where you grew up. What are events that the community comes out for? Are there sayings that people use in the world? What does it look like?
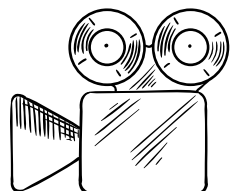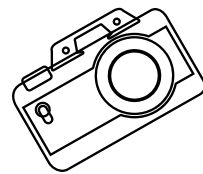
Write your response.

NOTES

Get ready for more keywords on the way!

MORE KEY TERMS

Plot

The plot is what happens in your story; the sequence of events, in relationship to the main character.

Treatment

A treatment is an in-depth story version of your screenplay. This is usually written before writing your screenplay.

Beat Sheet

This is an outline of what actions, or beats happen in every act.

Acts

Screenplays are broken into Acts. Acts are the separation points in your story. You can say acts are broken up according to your beginning, middle, and end. It gets more in depth than that, but let's start there for now.
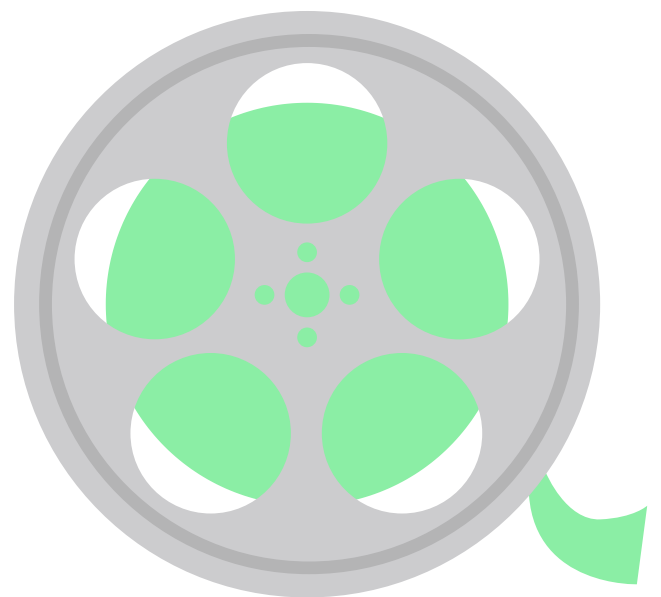
ACTS AND THE THREE-ACT STRUCTURE

Aristotle

The concept of the Act structure is derived from Greek philosopher, Aristotle from a collection of lectures called *Poetics.* His lectures dated back to around 330 BCE! Centuries later, we still use his story breakdown to shape stories.

The three-act structure is a very popular way to divide up your story, with the beginning, middle, and end.

The beginning should give information about your world, your characters, who's who, and the problem.

The middle includes more about the obstacles and how the protagonist pushes through them.

The ending is the final battle, what the protagonist has learned and how they have changed.

There are other Act structures, some are 4, 5, even 8 acts. I encourage you to take a look at them, but you will find that they all stem from the three-act structure, and it's a great place to start.
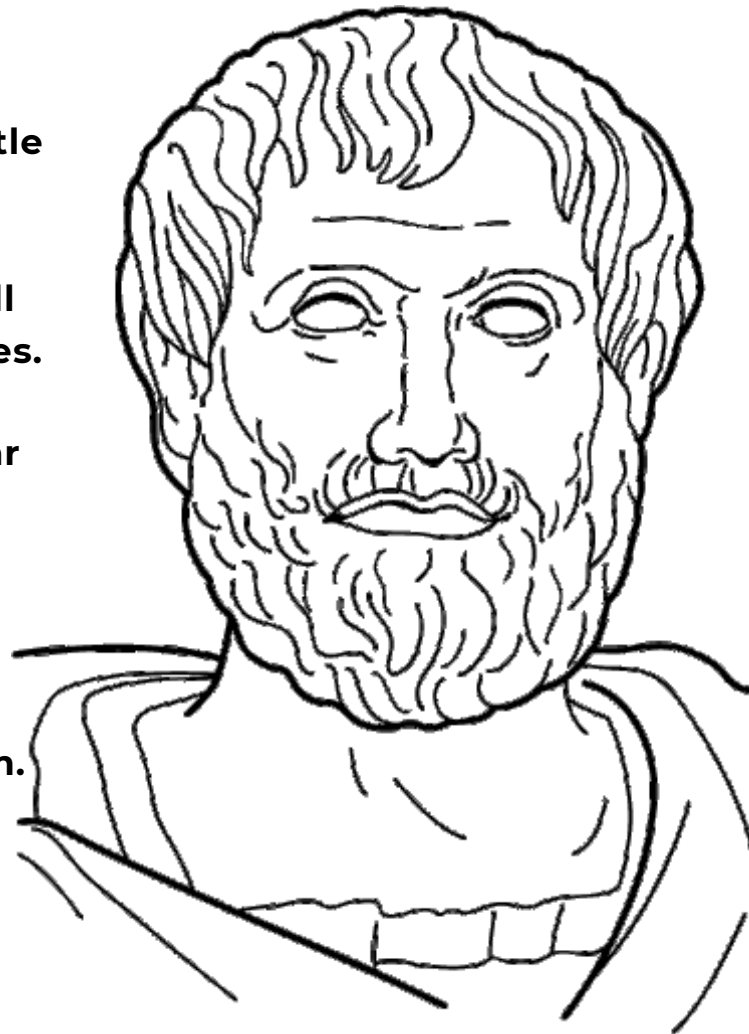
Aristotle

THE HERO'S JOURNEY

Joseph Campbell

A discussion about screenwriting is not complete without Joseph Campbell's 'Hero's Journey.'

The idea Campbell presents is the protagonist wants something, is made aware of the stakes in achieving a goal, refuses the call, builds the courage to go for the goal, runs into challenges, but grows from the process, which allows that person the ability to win.

Writers throughout history have used this format For more information on the Hero's journey, check out the full breakdown on StudioBinder. The link is included in the resources folder.
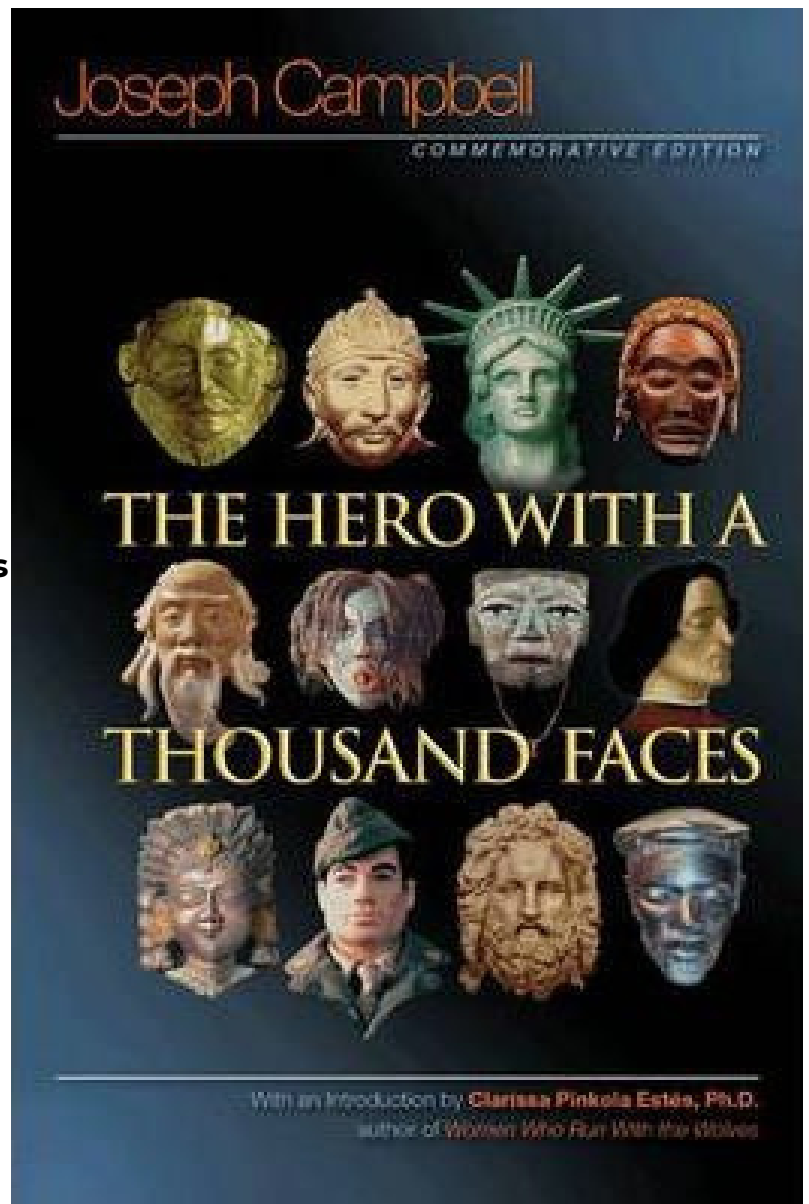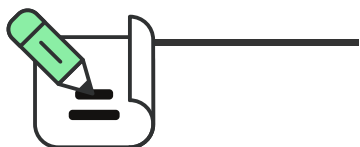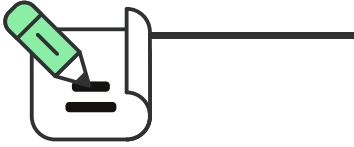
ACTIVITY PROMPT:

WRITE AN OUTLINE OF YOUR STORY

Using the story you wrote from topic one or something new, determine what happens in Act I, Act II, and Act III.
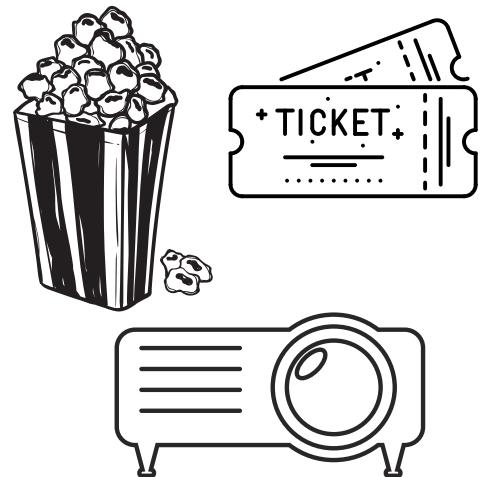
Write your response.

NOTES

Remember to think about your world, who your protagonist is, and what conflict(s) the protagonist run(s) into.
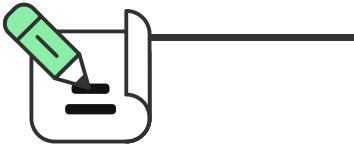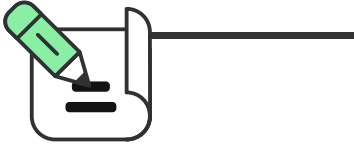
REFLECTION:

WHAT STOOD OUT?

What stood out to you in examining the different parts that go into writing your story? A lot goes into preparing a story!
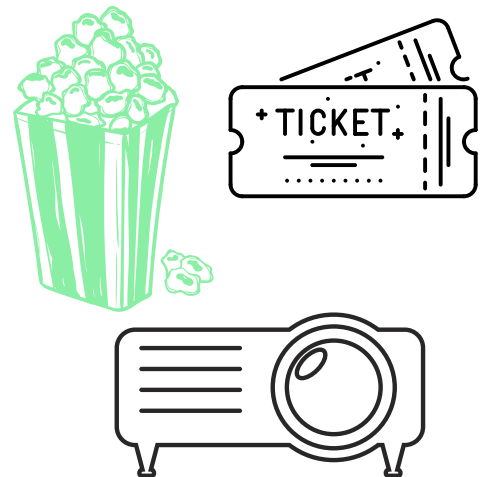
Write your response.

NOTES

You are now closer to getting your story ready for a screenplay!

"THERE IS ONLY ONE PLOT—THINGS ARE NOT WHAT THEY SEEM." - JIM THOMPSON
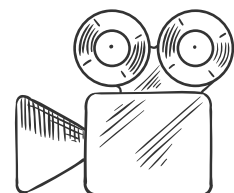
3. THE SCREENPLAY FORMAT

Chapter Goals:

Identify how a screenplay is formatted

Review what the function of a screenplay is

Compare script pages from different films

Determine the importance of formatting

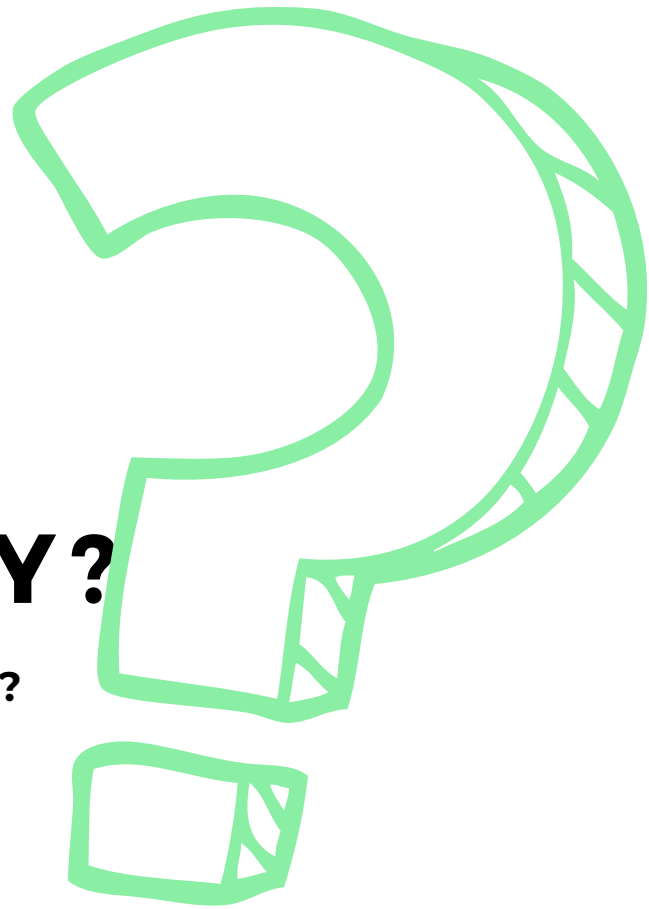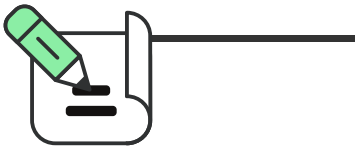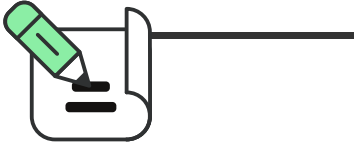**HOOK PROMPT:**

WHAT IS THE FUNCTION OF A SCREENPLAY?

What is the screenplay's function? Why do you think it is used?

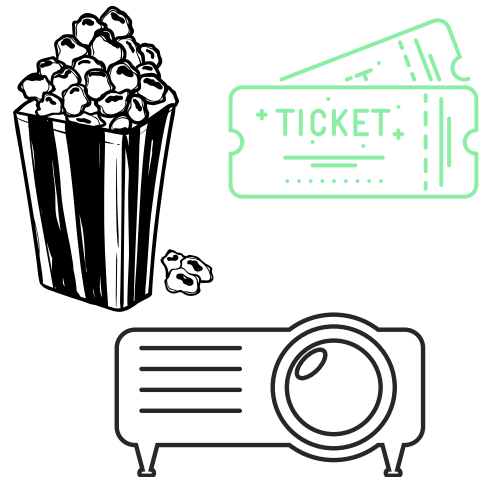**Write your response below.**

NOTES

Think about your answer as we examine what a screenplay looks like and how it is used.

THE SCREENPLAY FORMAT

Toy Story

```
                    "TOY STORY"

FADE IN:

INT. ANDY'S BEDROOM

A row of moving boxes lie on the floor of the room.
They are drawn up in crayon to look like a miniature
Western town.   The bedroom is lined with cloud wallpaper
giving the impression of sky.

One of the boxes has a children's illustrated "WANTED"
poster of a Mr. Potato Head taped to it.

A MR. POTATO HEAD DOLL is set in front of the poster.
The VOICE OVER of ANDY, a 6-year-old boy, can be heard
acting out all the voices of the scene.

                    ANDY (as POTATO HEAD)
          Alright everyone, this is a stick-
          up!  Don't anybody move!  Now empty
          that safe!

A GROUP OF TOYS have been crowded together in front of
the "BANK" box.

Andy's hand lowers A CERAMIC PIGGY BANK in front of Mr.
Potato Head and shakes out a pile of coins to the floor.
Mr. Potato Head kisses the coins.

                    ANDY (as POTATO HEAD)
       Ooh!  Money.  Money.  Money.
                (kissing noises)
```

This is an excerpt from the screenplay *Toy Story* by Joss Whedon, Andrew Stanton, Joel Cohen, and Alec Sokolow. Take a look at the formatting. Screenplays are different from other formats, like novels, because the screenplay is meant to be reviewed quickly. That way, director, actors and crew involved in making the film can easily follow along.

THE SCREENPLAY FORMAT

Action lines ↓

Jessie stares at a few of the homes.

The block is a quiet suburb. Multi-story houses decked out in Christmas decor.

They pull into a driveway packed with cars. Their house stands out, as it's the only one on the block without Christmas decorations.

                    JESSIE — *Character*
          Why are there so many cars?

                    PAUL
          Because we have a full house! — *dialogue*

Jessie's anxiety increases. Joshua stops the car and turns off the engine. Paul exits. Joshua gives Jessie a happy glance before getting out.

EXT. CLARENDON PLACE - DAY — *slugline*

Jessie leaves the car. Now, face to face with the old neighborhood.

Joshua and Paul grab luggage from the trunk as Jessie takes a few steps. She looks down at the sidewalk, at the dirt and ice crystals covering it. With intention, she wipes the debris with her foot, revealing a carved imprint of four crowns.

INT. NGWE HOUSEHOLD - FOYER - DAY

The house is booming and radiant. Kids chase each other around, relatives are everywhere. So. Many. People. Jessie's worst nightmare.

Jessie enters the house, with Uncle Paul and Joshua following.

                    JOSHUA — *parenthetical*
          (to Jessie)
          We invited everyone ahead of
          Christmas! So we can all be
          together until the big Y2K.

The areas circled are key components of a screenplay. In the next page, you will review the terms.

THE SCREENPLAY FORMAT: KEY TERMS

```
Andy places a TOY DOG, with a SLINKY for a mid-section,
in front of Mr. Potato Head and stretches him out.

                    ANDY (as WOODY)
          Well I brought my DINOSAUR, who eats
          force field dogs!!

Andy reveals a PLASTIC TYRANNOSAURUS REX, who stomps on
the Slinky Dog.

                    ANDY (as DINOSAUR)
          AAAAR!   ROAR-ROAR-ROAR!

                    ANDY (as SLINKY DOG)
          YIPE!   YIPE-YIPE-YIPE!

                    ANDY (as WOODY)
          You're goin' to jail, Bart.

Andy picks up Mr. Potato Head and places him in a baby
crib in the room.

                      - 2 -
```

Excerpt from *Toy Story* (1995)

Dialogue

Dialogue goes underneath the character.

Action Lines

Action lines give the reader a description of what is happening. It is a good practice to keep these descriptions as succinct as possible. If they are longer than a paragraph, it's good to break it up.

Character

The character is identified and separated in a new line.

Slug Line

The slug line, or scene header, opens with EXT. or INT. and tells you the location of the scene.

The format is very specific. The spacing and position of the format is very important, so you want to make sure it's spaced correctly. A quick way to ensure this is to use programs that do the formatting for you. Final Draft is a very popular software, used in the industry. Studio Binder has a free version available on their website. You can also use Microsoft Word and configure your heading so it's space correctly.

**REFLECTION:**

READ SCRIPTS!

To conclude and reflect, why do you believe organization is so important for writing your screenplay? In general? Why is the template important? It's good practice to read scripts often, to gain more understanding of how they work. You can start by looking for a script for a film you really enjoy. Read the screenplay and compare it to the film.
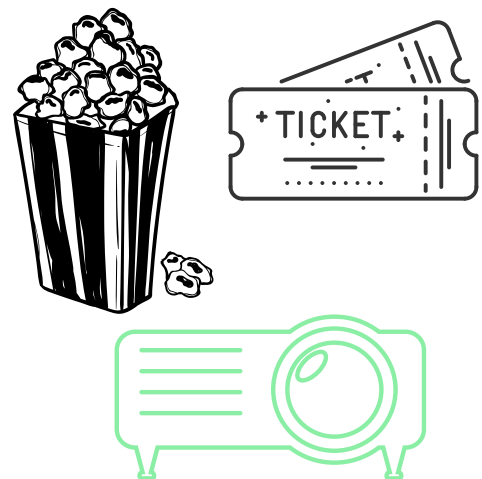
Write your response below.
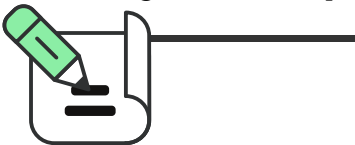
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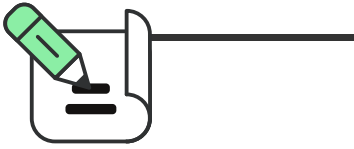
Studio Binder is an online resource that provides an in-depth breakdown of what is featured in the screenplay.

4. THE LOGLINE

Chapter Goals:

Identify what a logline is

Write your own logline
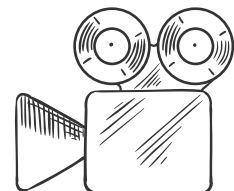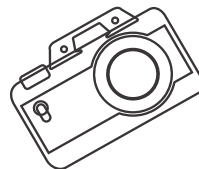
HOOK PROMPT:

WHEN YOU DECIDE TO WATCH A FILM OR SHOW, WHAT GETS YOU INTERESTED IN WATCHING?
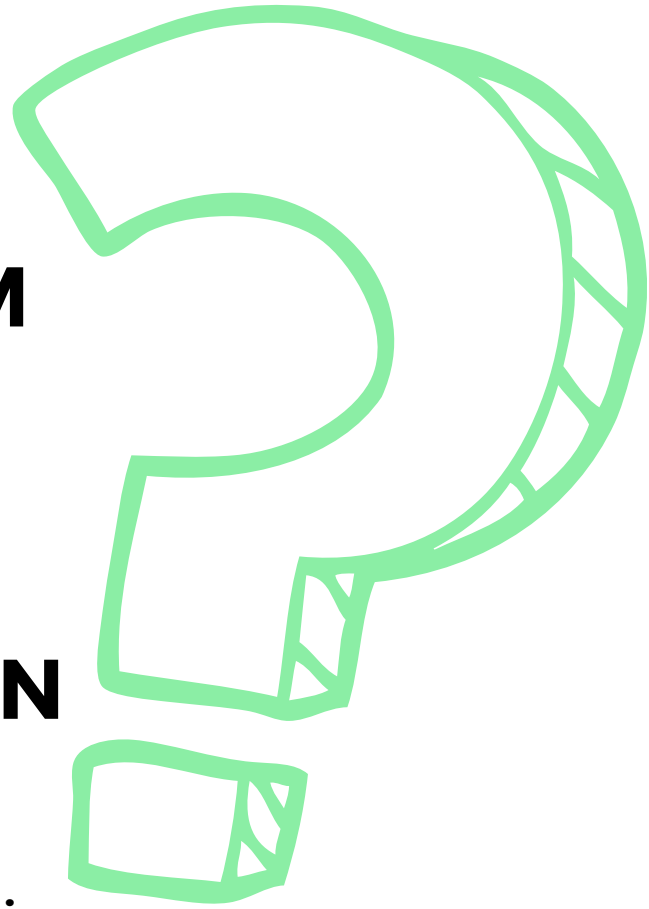
What motivates you to buy a movie ticket, rent the movie, or watch on a streaming platform like Netflix?
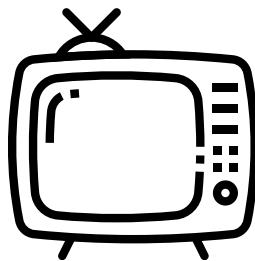
Write your response below.
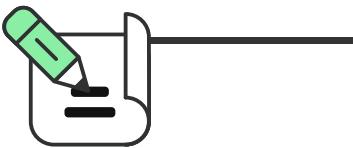
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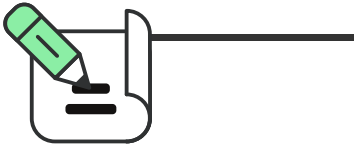
Getting others interested in your screenplay can start from how you describe it. This is where the logline comes into play.
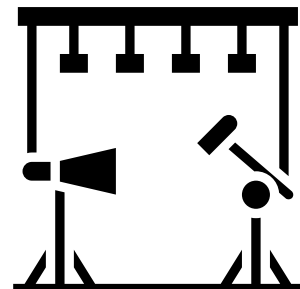
Logline: Under the abusive direction of his famed music teacher, an ambitious student struggles to realize his full potential in becoming one of the greats.

A family of undercover superheroes, while trying to live the quiet suburban life, are forced into action to save the world.

LOGLINES

Loglines are a way to grab our attention and tell us why we should watch the film.

WHAT IS A LOGLINE?

Key term

The logline is a one to two sentence description of what your story is about. In a way, it is very much like a text version of a trailer, where the story is explained, without giving the entire story away.

Setting   Protagonist   Problem   Antagonist   Conflict/Action   Goal

A spirited farm boy joins a rebellion to save a princess from a sinister imperial enforcer - and the galaxy from a planet-destroying weapon.

A family of undercover superheroes, while trying to live the quiet suburban life, are forced into action to save the world.

Logline: Under the abusive direction of his famed music teacher, an ambitious student struggles to realize his full potential in becoming one of the greats.

What's in a logline?

Your logline should have the character and an adjective to describe the character. Do not use a proper name unless this is an extremely important part of telling the story:
(ex. A lonely janitor. What doesn't work (Bob Winston, a janitor…) The inciting incident. What is an event that changes your protagonist's life?
What is the choice the protagonist will be forced to make?

ACTIVITY PROMPT:

WRITE A LOGLINE

Now it's time to write a logline of your own. Create a logline for your story. Keep the logline at two sentences. If you can do it in one sentence, great!
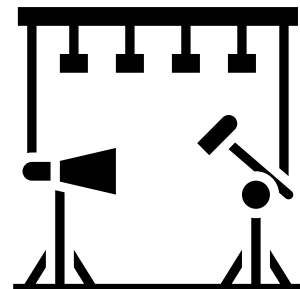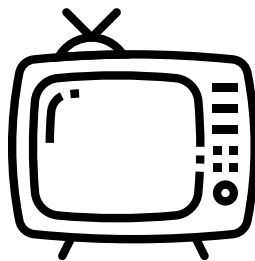
Write your response.
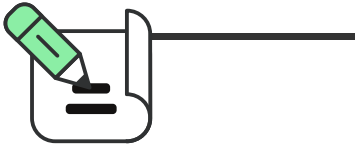
NOTES

Ask a friend or relative for feedback, for opportunities to make changes, or ensure your logline is attention-grabbing.
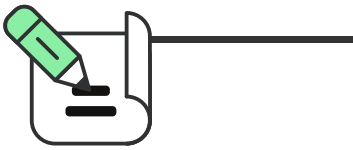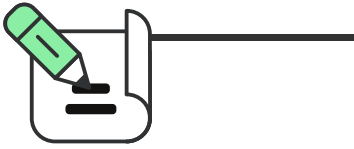
REFLECTION:

WHY ARE LOGLINES IMPORTANT?
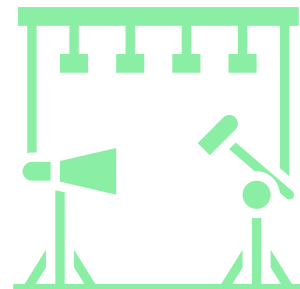
Why is it important to describe your idea using few words?

Write your response.

NOTES

If you find you are having trouble making sense of your logline, this could reveal that your story needs some refinement. You may also find that your logline reveals some changes that your story needs.
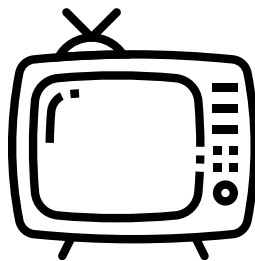
5.WRITING YOUR SCREENPLAY

Chapter Goals:

Review examples of screenwriting software
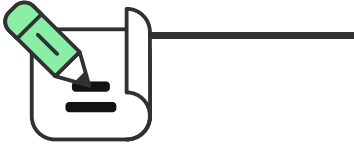
Write the first page of your screenplay.
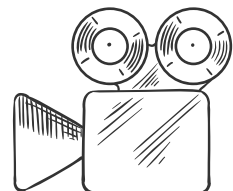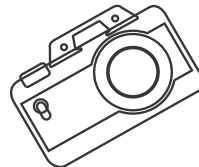
HOOK PROMPT:

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO WRITE A SCREENPLAY?

**How long does it take to write a script? Take your best estimate!**

Write your response below.
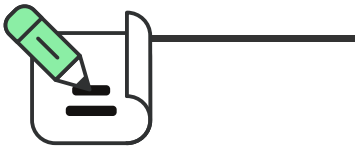
NOTES

Some writers can work on scripts for 10 years. It can take time to write a story and develop it, so don't be discouraged if it takes more time than expected.

If you do write quickly, it's good to revisit and make sure you've covered areas that you need to cover. We'll talk more about that process in the future topic, Revising and editing.
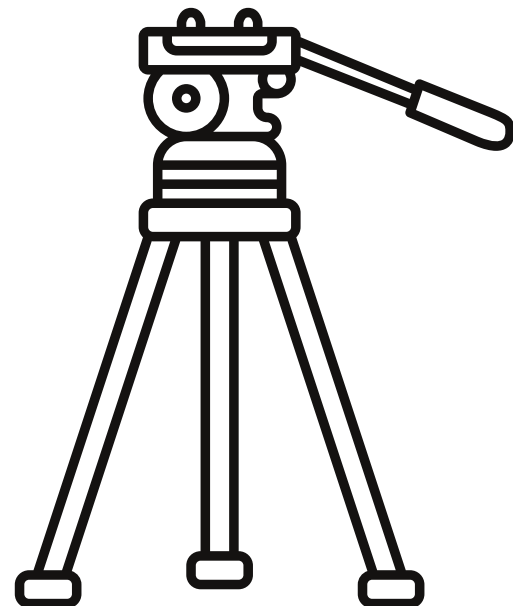
SCREENWRITING SOFTWARE

There are different applications out there for writing your screenplay. Final Draft has become an industry standard. While it's not free, there are other programs that are. Studio Binder has an app that you can access on their website. Celtx has been around for many years. Others use Microsoft Word to format, which can be used with proper presets.
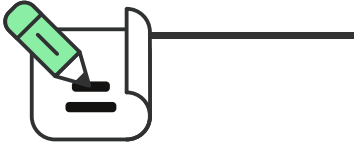
ACTIVITY PROMPT:

WRITE THE FIRST PAGE OF YOUR SCREENPLAY

For this activity, use screenwriting software like StudioBinder or write by hand, the first page of your screenplay, using the story outline you created. Feel free to keep writing if more ideas come.
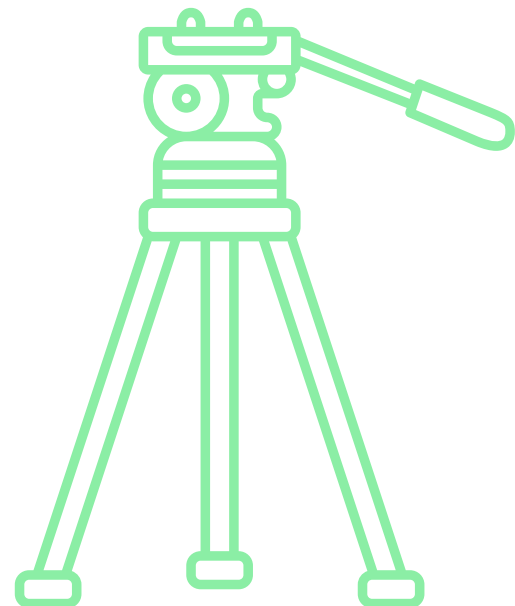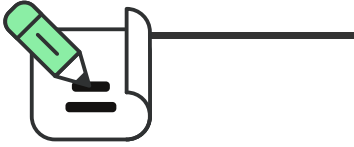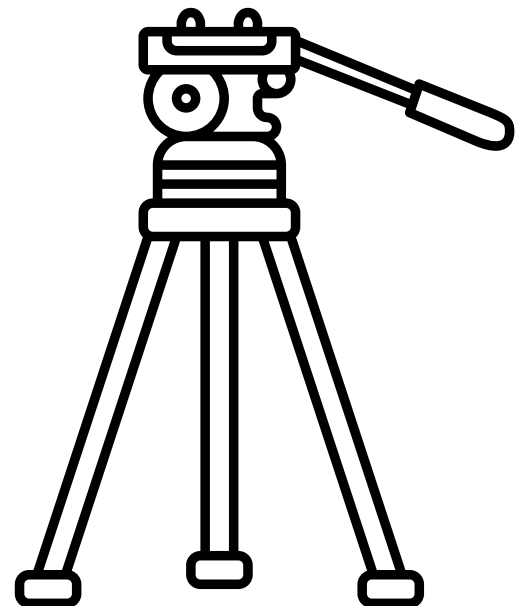
Write your response.
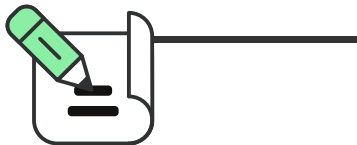
NOTES

Revisit your story outline and key terms we used in previous lessons to help you get started.
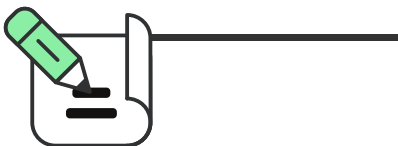
NOTES

Happy writing!

REFLECTION:

HOW DID WRITING GO?

Congratulations on writing your first page or pages of your screenplay! To reflect, what are some things that surprised you about this process?
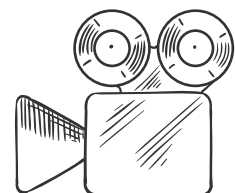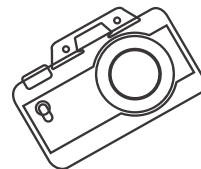
Write your response.

6. REVISING AND EDITING YOUR SCRIPT

Chapter Goals:

Review why it is important to edit your finished screenplay
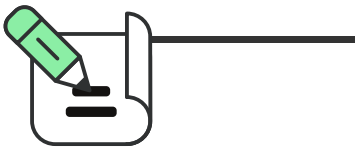
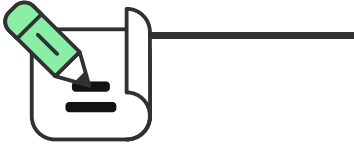Identify areas in your screenplay to revise.

HOOK PROMPT:

WHY ARE REVISIONS IMPORTANT?

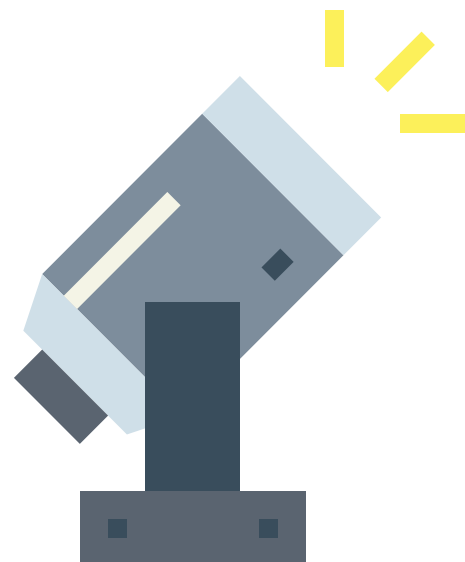**What is the importance of revising your screenplay?**

Write your response below.

NOTES

When a draft is complete, it's important to review the work for errors, plot gaps, etc.

REVISIONS AND WHAT TO CHECK FOR

When revising your screenplay, here are important things to check for:

Grammar

Dialogue

Formatting

Clear actions

Clear beginning, middle, and end

Correct grammar use is important for writing an effective screenplay. It shows you are a strong writer, and it helps others understand your story.

Formatting is also important for similar reasons. You want to make sure it is spaced properly. Your story should have a clear message and actions that flow well. Is the story you want to share showing on the page? Make sure the information is clearly stated.
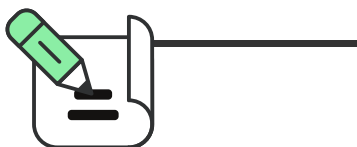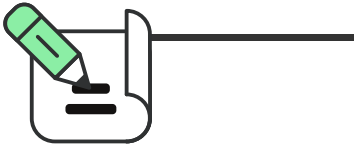
ACTIVITY PROMPT:

REVISE YOUR SCREENPLAY

In this activity, you will get started on the revising process. Check your screenplay for errors, and circle them if you see any.
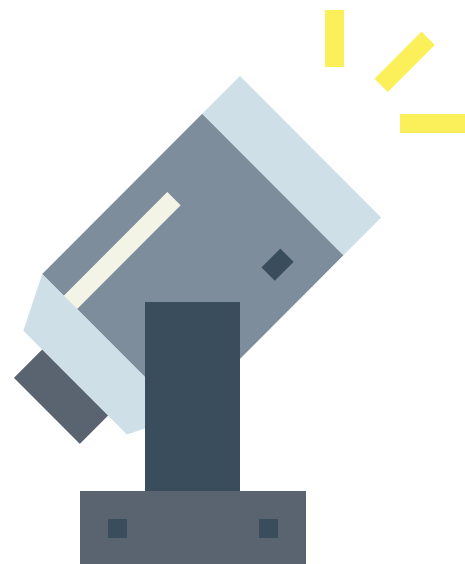
Write your response.

NOTES

Are there areas in your story that are unclear? Is the dialogue realistic? Are there areas that could be improved? Circle these areas as well.
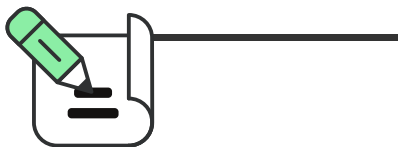
REFLECTION:

HOW IS THE REVISION PROCESS HELPFUL?
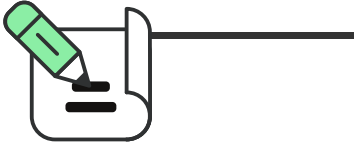
How is the rewriting process helpful? Can you identify other areas in life where it's helpful to revise?
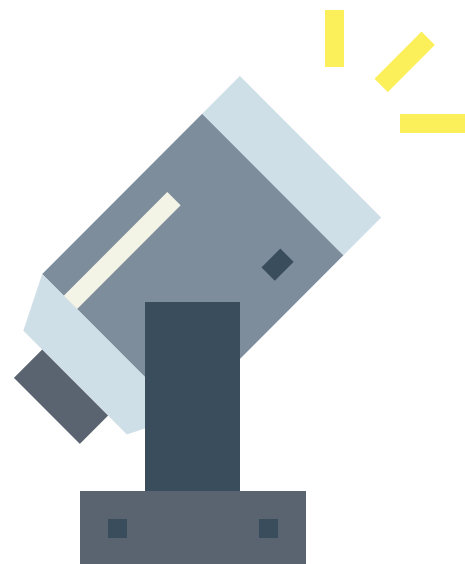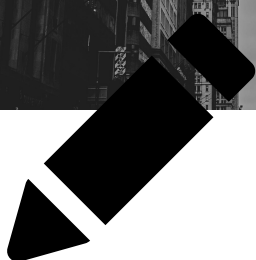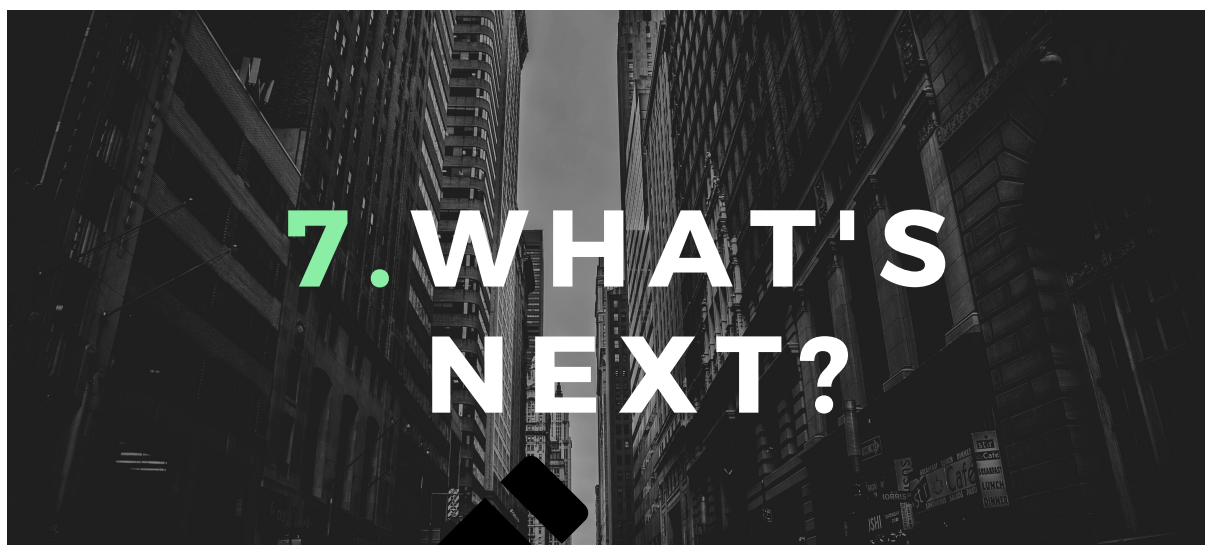
Write your response.

NOTES

The revising process can be challenging, but revisions help you tell a clearer story and increase the chances of having a successful film!
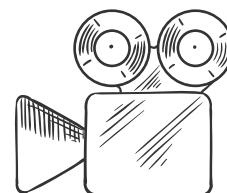
7. WHAT'S NEXT?

Chapter Goals:

Explore examples of what to do with your completed screenplay
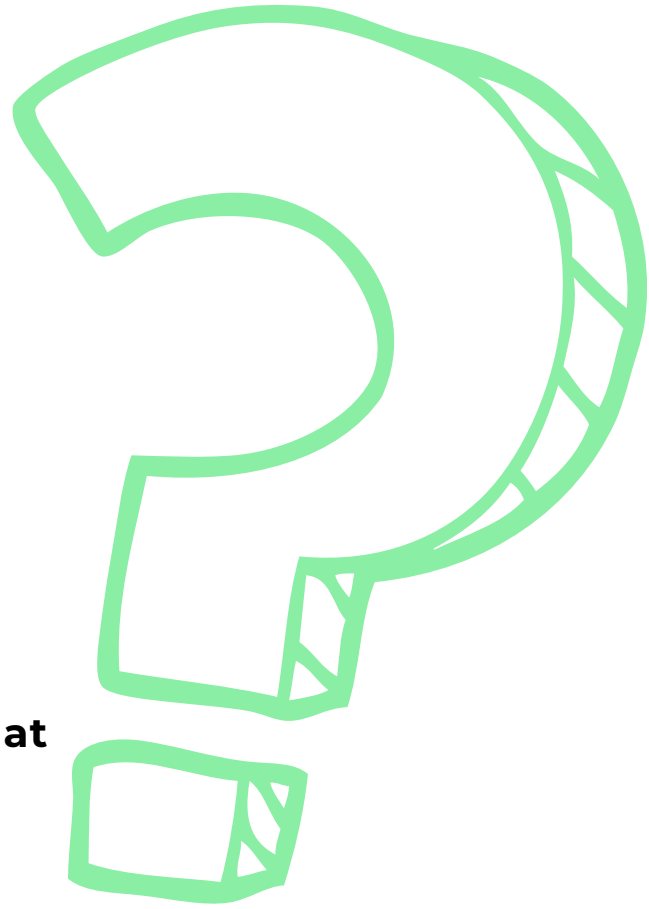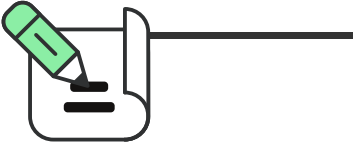
Write out your plans for your screenplay
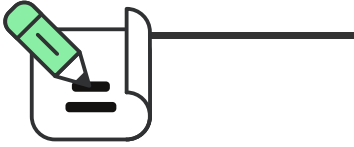
HOOK PROMPT:

WHAT'S THE NEXT STEP FOR YOUR STORY?

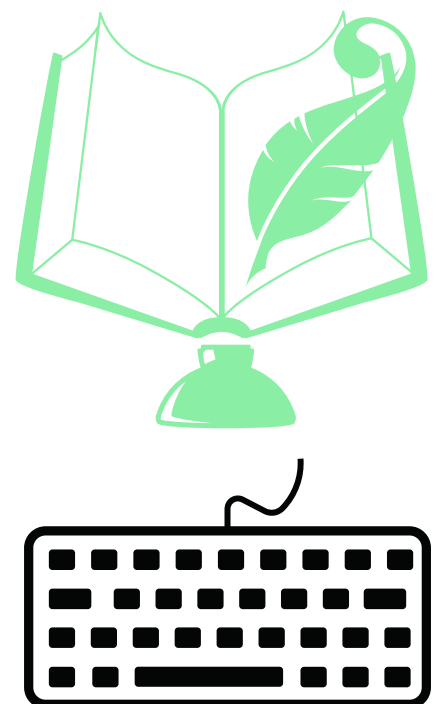**Take some time to brainstorm what the next step would be.**

Write your response below.

NOTES

Next steps may vary and we will use this topic to explore some possible directions for next steps.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Festivals and Contests

There are many festivals, fellowships, and contests that accept scripts. This could be a great way to get exposure as a writer. Some contests offer feedback,
which can help you identify ways to revise your screenplay.

Fellowships can offer you the opportunity to work with a mentor in connecting your screenplay with people
who can get your story made. These opportunities usually cost money, but there are some free ones out there. Coverfly is a good resource for tracking your screenplays and looking at contests accepting scripts. Included in the resources are a list of festivals highly recommended to submit to.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Collaborations

You might find that you want one or several other people to help you write your story. This may happen earlier in the process of developing your screenplay. Having a co-writer can be helpful for bouncing off ideas and providing fresh perspectives.

This practice is done with multiple people in the TV industry, where many writers develop an entire season of episodes. This is called the writers' room. You could do something similar if you are working on a tv show, but it's also possible to do this for a feature film. Just make sure your writers are credited!

WHAT'S NEXT?

More Revising

Another possible next step is to keep revising. It can take time to get the story in its best shape, so doing additional revisions is a good practice.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Put Away the Screenplay

After spending a lot of time with your screenplay, you might feel burnt out and that's okay! You can put the story down and take some time away from it. Revisiting it later may help you find new ideas or point out some things to change. I've found that some time away from the project can give me time to think about new ideas and getting more idea
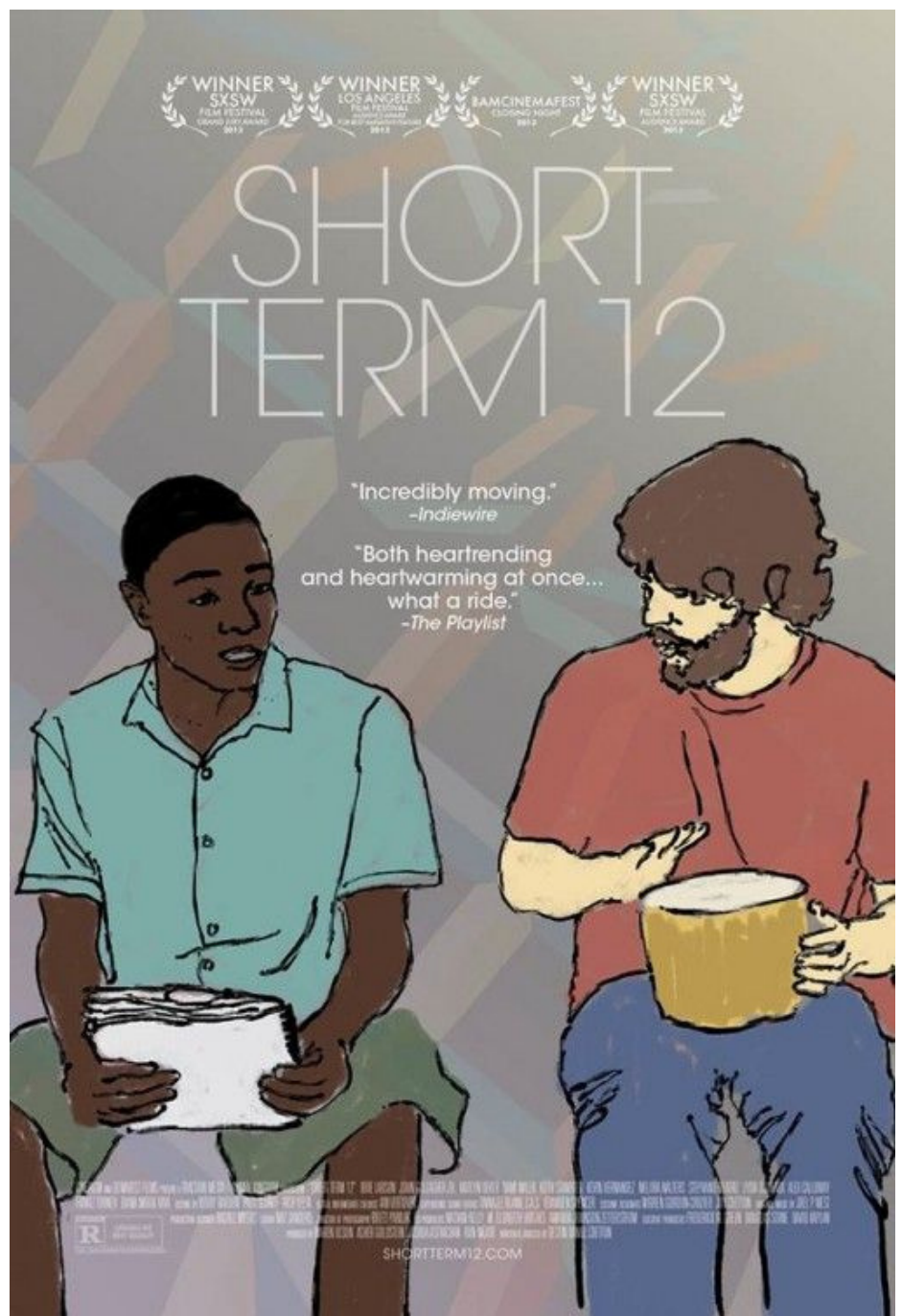
WHAT'S NEXT?

Make a Film

With a script ready, you can make the film on your own and get others to help you. You can record using your phone or a camera if you have access.

We won't have the opportunity to go into independent filmmaking in this DIY, but check out resources like No Film School or tutorials on YouTube if you need support in getting started.
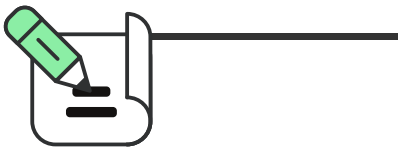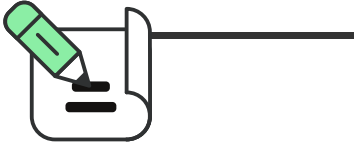
REFLECTION:

CELEBRATE YOUR SUCCESS!

what will your next step be? Be sure to celebrate what you accomplished!
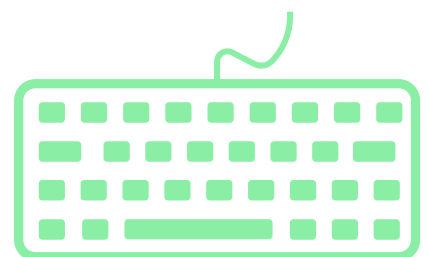
Write your response.

NOTES

You wrote a story, examined how story and screenplays worked, wrote story outlines and started and/or completed a screenplay! Way to go!

"I'VE NOTICED THAT THE TRUTH WORKS… IF YOU'RE BEING YOURSELF AND YOU'RE JUST USING YOUR OWN EMOTIONS, THEY CAN FEEL IT. IF YOU'RE DOING FAKE, THEY CAN FEEL IT. IT TOOK ME A WHILE IN COMEDY TO REALISE THAT YOUR TRUTH IS MORE POWERFUL THAN YOUR MASK."
- JORDAN PEELE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Christine G. Leapman
Joseph Santarromana
My fellow MFA mates
Denise McCarthy
My screenwriting professors
To all my teachers and their patient guidance
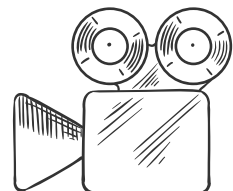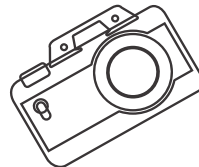
RESOURCES

Online Resources

Studio Binder
The Script Lab/TSL
Screenplayed
Film Freeway (for contests)

Script Slug (for scripts)
SimplyScripts (more scripts)
ScriptNotes Podcast
Coverfly (for contests)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chantal Eyong

Chantal Eyong is in the Creative Writing graduate program at UC Riverside. She has made documentaries, short fiction films, and writes screenplays. She is excited to be a Gluck fellow and share tools and resources to get you started in writing stories of your own!

https://gluckprogram.ucr.edu
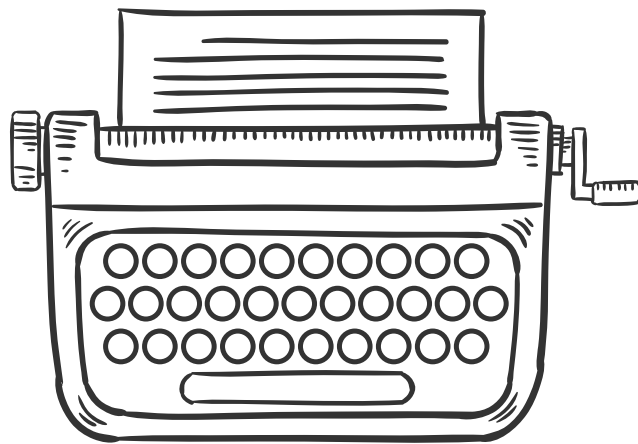
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