7 Tips To Get Your Screenplay Started

Those first few steps can be the hardest, and the ones most likely to keep you from reaching your goals. Here are some tips to get you over that initial hurdle. Different pointers, in different combinations, will click for different people. Start at whatever stage of the process you're currently working with, try some out, and see what works for you.

Let us know how it goes!

1. **Get your head right.**

   o Decide that it's time to bring your movie idea to fruition. Here are a few mental focuses to help keep you on track.

      ▪ Don't just work on it when you have nothing else going on and you feel like it. Nothing gets achieved on such a schedule. Plan a regular time to work on your script; every day if possible – during your lunch hour, before work, after work, before bed, any time is okay. Make a consistent schedule and stick to it.

      ▪ Set an easy, achievable goal for every session, and make sure you come away with something tangible to show for your work. It's easy to lose thirty minutes or more staring into space and waiting for "inspiration," but I strongly warn you against this pitfall. Each time you finish, try to have a few more ideas written down, a draft of your logline, another few note cards filled out, or any visible concrete indicator that you're (at least) one step closer to your goal.

      ▪ If you have a favorite screenwriting book, take it off the shelf and delve into it again. If not, I highly recommend reading the greats. There's much to be gleaned from each of them. (A list is included at the end). DON'T get so engrossed that you put off your writing in favor of reading. Think if it as a practical guide by your side as you write, not an abstract theory to study before starting your script.

2. **Assemble your gear.**

   o If you go to the gym, and change into your workout clothes, you're more likely to work out. If you buy the surfboard and sign up for a class, you're more likely to take the plunge and learn how to surf. If you go grocery shopping, then lay the ingredients out on the counter, you're more likely to cook dinner instead of copping out and ordering a pizza. The same goes for writing. Gather the things you'll need, and you're more likely to get going.

   o Designate a place, in your home or out, to write. This will help keep your routine consistent. It should be a place where all of your resources (mentioned below) are easily accessible, and the level of background noise (or silence) suits your particular workflow.

   o If you don't already have it, get a screenwriting software program. There are several industry leaders that are great, like Final Draft and Movie Magic, and there are even some free alternatives that'll work just fine, like Celtx. There's no point in trying to manually format a screenplay from a Word document when these programs exist.

   o Once you've chosen a guru to follow from the aforementioned book of your choice, grab any other materials that the method requires – notecards, a white board, markers, highlighters, art supplies, etc. And speaking of the proper use of gear…

   o Start low-tech. This may sound strange, but your creativity will flow much better from pens, pencils, paper, and actual physical note cards in the beginning. So I recommend that you start with these raw materials, instead of going straight to the digital, software-based stuff.

3. **Get Excited about your idea**

   o First you should realize that, by getting started, you're already ahead of the game. Most people with "great ideas" for a movie never bring a single word of them into existence. But you're about to!

   o Make a list of ideas in any format you want; whatever's in your head that inspired you to write this movie – cool scenes, interesting characters, fun and snappy lines of dialog, whatever. When you're actually looking at the best bits of your idea in text, instead of them just rolling around in your head, the possibilities for your film will start to become real for you!
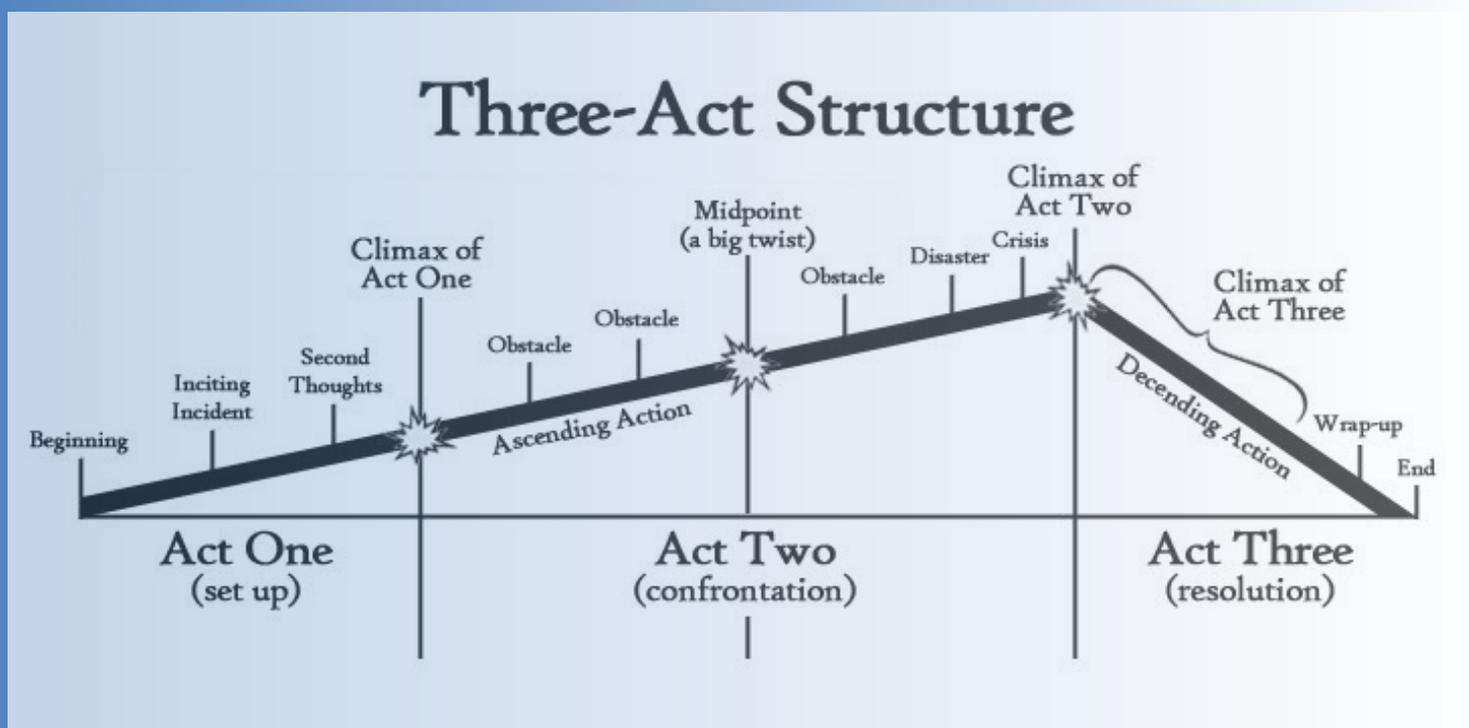
4. **Hone in on your logline**

   o You'll feel overwhelmed and quickly get discouraged if you start writing with no roadmap, and the logline (1-2 sentence summary of your story) is that roadmap in its simplest form. The components of a logline are:

      1) A protagonist: the main character
      2) A goal: what the protagonist wants
      3) An Antagonist: the bad guy, or opposing force, to the protagonist
      4) Stakes: the consequences if the protagonist fails
      5) (Optional) Back story/ world info: might be necessary to set up the story, if there's something unusually important about these factors

   o Go though your list of ideas, start figuring out how the pieces fit together as a cohesive narrative (You might find that some ideas are incompatible with this story and may belong in another. Put them aside for the next project. Don't delete them!), and parse out your logline components.

   o Construct your logline. The layout should look something like this:

      ➢ [*Back story/ world info* to set up, if applicable], (*Protagonist*) must (*goal* against *Antagonist*) or (*Stakes*).

      ➢ Example: Logline for *The Dark Knight*: *A masked vigilante hero must stop a sadistic domestic terrorist before his attacks destroy Gotham City.*

         • There's much more to the movie, but this expresses the basic overarching through line. This approach should work for most stories, but some might have special needs and require a differently structured logline. There is a wealth of information online about ways to write them. I would suggest keeping it as concise and to the point as possible.

         ▪ NOTE: Just like everything else in the writing process, the logline that you formulate here is a tool, not an unalterable contract. It is almost certain to change as you move forward in the process. The more thought-out and refined it is at this stage, the better, but always be flexible.

5. **Time to work out a rough story structure.**

   o Again, there are many possible modes of attack here, each with its own merits. This is an extension and elaboration of what you did to make your logline. Take the most important elements of your story, and start to plot them out to make a beginning middle, and end. Be as rough or as detailed as you want here, and leave it open for alterations later.

   o Put together some sort of visual representation of your overall story structure. The most well known is the 3-Act structure (pictured below). Some writers like to diagram their structure, others make a list-style outline of sequences and scenes, many (including me) like the method of writing sequences on notecards, then laying out the plot of the movie in rows and columns. Most use some combination of these and other techniques. Play around and see which one best brings the movie together in your head.

   o When crafting your plot, many writers find it helpful to start with the ending. If you know where it's going, it's easier to work backwards and form a sensible path to get there.

Three-Act Structure

Climax of Act Two

Midpoint (a big twist)

Crisis

Disaster

Obstacle

Climax of Act One

Climax of Act Three

Obstacle

Obstacle

Second Thoughts

Inciting Incident

Ascending Action

Decending Action

Wrap-up

Beginning

End

Act One
(set up)

Act Two
(confrontation)

Act Three
(resolution)

6. **Spend a little time planning your opening.**

   o Watch some great movie openings – not as a fan, but as an analyst. Think about what story functions are carried out by the opening sequence. These usually include:

      ▪ Introducing the main character(s)

      ▪ Showing us the world we're in

      ▪ Setting up, or at least hinting at, the main problems that will need to be solved in the story

   o As you watch, take notes about how these (and other) functions are accomplished and how you can do the same things, but in different ways, in yours.

   o WARNING: Don't fall into the trap of just watching a bunch of movies and putting off writing, while telling yourself that you're "preparing," or "doing research." Employ some discipline here.

7. **And finally… Open that screenwriting software!**

   o Write your opening scene. Emphasis on WRITE! Don't overthink this step. You've done your prep work, and now it's time to move your fingers. Don't get stuck by playing the perfectionist and trying to edit as you write. There will be plenty of time to rewrite, revise, and edit later. The important thing now is that your vision starts to materialize. Here are some tips to help with this step:

      ▪ Think and write in images, rather than literary prose. Envision what your scene will *look like*, and describe that with the most engaging and concise wording that will clearly convey it.

      ▪ Leave some questions unanswered for the audience at the beginning. It's a great way to keep them engaged.

      ▪ And, lastly…

o **Leave some creativity in the tank.** Stop writing before you're out of steam. Don't keep going until you're exhausted and unsure of what comes next. If you do, you risk not coming back to it until you "think of something." An extremely effective way of deciding when to stop for the day is to build up to something you're really exited about; like a big fight, the dramatic first meeting of multiple interesting characters, a big plot twist, or whatever, and then stop! Leave that super awesome event for the next session. That way you won't be able to fight the urge to get back to it. You'll actually look forward to your next shift behind the keyboard! Try to do this with every writing day, and a consistent schedule won't be a problem!

That should get you going. Thanks for downloading and best of luck for your screenwriting success!

Some of my favorite screenwriting books: