

Daniel Greenway (1705106)

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THE SCRIPT FORMULA

Throughout the last decade, there has been an ongoing trend of the production of soulless and boring films. I've watched too many poorly made cash-grabs this year, and it makes me lose hope for the film and theatre-going experience. The myriad of impressive films are overshadowed by the big-budget, explosion-ridden, mind-numbing experience that is 'modern cinema'. Every film that I've enjoyed, has an 'identity' to it; a certain something that puts it in a category above the rest. Big production companies focus on grabbing audiences attention with fancy computer graphics and often neglect 'that something extra' that makes a film great. The attention spans of audiences are at a steady decrease as the new 'Netflix culture' continues to thrive, allowing thousands of films to be watched on any device we choose. There are obviously great films being made, but they tend to be 'hidden gems' that require sifting through endless arrays of films to find. All films start with a script; the guidelines for the film and a great script must have everything going for it to have any chance of working with a core premise to build on. I've been reading several scripts such as Chinatown, American Beauty and Goodfellas and each script follows a similar formula and clear setup, confrontation and resolution; beginning, middle and end, while also all being critically acclaimed films. While structure is crucial to a working script, it can't rely on the structure alone to carry it to critical praise. Without 'that something extra', you just get a generic film that, while it may be serviceable, is easily forgettable and lacks character. I want to explore what 'that something extra' might be. One of my favourite television shows; Breaking Bad, is an amazing example that hits all of the marks of a well developed script and I would like to explore why that is.



The first scene of the show starts off with a bang and hooks you in from the start. Here is the first few lines from the pilot episode of Breaking Bad :

“... ZOOOM! WHEELS plow right through the shit with a SPLAT.

NEW ANGLE - AN RV

The Winnebago galumphs across the landscape, scattering cows. It catches a wheel and sprays a rooster tail of red dirt.

INT. WINNEBAGO - DAY

Inside, the DRIVER's knuckles cling white to the wheel. He's got the pedal flat. Scared, breathing fast. His eyes bug wide behind the faceplate of his gas mask.

Oh, by the way, he's wearing a GAS MASK. That, and white jockey UNDERPANTS. Nothing else.

Buckled in the seat beside him lolls a clothed PASSENGER, also wearing a gas mask.

Blood streaks down from his ear, blotting his T-shirt. He's passed out cold.

Behind them, the interior is a wreck. Beakers and buckets and flasks -- some kind of ad-hoc CHEMICAL LAB -- spill their noxious contents with every bump we hit. Yellow-brown liquid washes up and down the floor. It foams in a scum around...

... Two DEAD BODIES. Two freshly deceased Mexican guys tumble like rag dolls, bumping into each other.

Completing this picture is the blizzard of MONEY. A Von's bag lies leaking twenties. Fifteen, twenty grand in cash wafts around in the air or floats in the nasty brown soup. CLOSE on the driver's eyes. He's panting like a steam engine. His mask FOGS UP until finally he can't see.

EXT. COW PASTURE - CONTINUOUS

The Winnebago comes roaring over a berm and down into a deep gully. Too deep. BAM! The front bumper bottoms out, burying itself. WAAAAAAH! The rear wheels spin air. The engine cuts off. Silence again. The Winnie's door kicks open and out stumbles underpants man. He yanks off his gas mask, lets it drop."

(Gilligan, 2009. *Breaking Bad* S.1 Ep. 1)

The original style of writing in the script hooks you instantly with quick cuts in the pilot that accurately represent the script. I've come to the realisation that this script/show has been the bench mark for me in terms of how to make a tightly made piece of content. The script is originally written and it's an amazing introduction to the series. If the show wasn't introduced with this scene, it would lack the hook that intrigues the audience and pulls viewer in. If the beginning of the show started with Walter White eating breakfast with his family, the patient audience member may stay and invest, but it would exclude someone who needs action right away to be intrigued. The scene is so memorable and crazy that it makes you want to know how Walter got himself into the position he's in. Right after the beginning sequence, it cuts to Walter's home life. Extremely mundane and normal; you might even say boring. The juxtaposition between the two events has a huge impact on the viewers, but it's also extremely difficult to make it believable that a boring high school chemistry teacher can become entangled in such a mess within the first episode. There are a few moments in the episode that make the extreme character change justified and believable, foreshadowing the future characteristics. Walter looks fed up with his life from the moment he's seen after the first scene. He gets his birthday breakfast from his wife, has a routine conversation with his family and then goes to work and you can tell he's tired of trying to inspire kids who don't want to be inspired. (You later find out that Walter has been

forced out of a company that he helped build which adds to his annoyance.) Walter can do so much more with his intelligence but he's stuck, struggling to pay bills in a dead end job. The next big moment in the episode is Walter gets diagnosed with cancer. This is the moment when Walter starts to 'break bad'. He finds his old student Jesse Pinkman and starts cooking meth with him to provide enough money for his family so they will be comfortable throughout their lives. Towards the end of the episode, Jesse and Walt share some important dialogue :

Jesse :

"Some straight like you, giant stick up his ass, age what - 60? He's just gonna break bad?"

Walter :

"I'm 50."

Jesse :

"It's weird is all, okay? It doesn't compute. Listen, if you've gone crazy or something... I mean, if you've... if you've gone crazy or depressed, I'm just saying... that's something I need to know about. Okay? I mean, that affects me."

[long pause]

Walter:

"I am awake."

(Gilligan, 2009. *Breaking Bad* S.1 Ep. 1)

Walter reveals so much in one line of dialogue. "I'm awake." Explains exactly what Walt is going through. His cancer diagnosis has freed him from his everyday life and the mundane. The first episode of *Breaking Bad* is amazingly written and sets up the show very

well. It gives such good motivation for Walter's sudden change of vocation and hooks you so you want to see how his journey will end.



Walter White is the best written character of all time. I'm a big fan of character driven films such as American Psycho, American Beauty, Nightcrawler, etc. It's very difficult to write characters and to make them believable to the audience and so many have failed at attempting to write characters with consistency. You have to keep the viewers interest while also setting up characters/story and to do that, you need conflict. "All drama is conflict. Without conflict, there is no action. Without action, there is no story. And without story, there is no screenplay." (Field, 2009) Four Screenplays: Studies in the American Screenplay, p.17. The characters, actions, actors, scenes, incidents, sequences, events, locations, score, acts, etc. are all superbly written in Breaking Bad and all add to the overall experience. It's the screenwriters job to carefully and cleverly weave all of the parts together and make it payoff for the viewer; it's no easy task. The arcs of the characters, the interactions, the payoff for all the characters are all there. The compact nature of the series is something that I really admire and there are no added seasons just to get more money. The series knows what it is, it sticks to it and ends after 5 seasons and doesn't compromise it's tone or characters just to please the viewers like some shows do. "Breaking Bad stuck to a

tight guideline with a clear beginning, middle and end. It was simple. Breaking Bad had one route to its conclusion and not once relied on a twist or previously unmentioned character from the past, in fact, it largely held onto its original -core, unit with additions such as Saul Goodman and Mike Ehrmantraut being both mainstays and enhancing the story instead of just adding to it.” Charmless Man (2013)

I’ve been learning how to create an in-depth character and realised how important it is to dive deep into the past of the character you want to make. I won’t have to ever share any of the information I’m creating for my character but it all gives greater context to the character and the situations they find themselves in. I write essays about their past relationships with people like father, mother, sibling, friend, spouse, etc. to help me decide what they will do in each situation. Without truly knowing my characters, I won’t be able to say what they’re going to do in a certain scene and to be consistent with it is crucial. Walter White is so believable because everything he does is justified and the character is so well written that you can look back throughout the show and pull out specific moments that give reason to his actions. I would love to be able to create a character such as Walter White in my third year film. Dialogue is a big issue for me so far in my scriptwriting; I want it to come across more natural and off the cuff than what I’m writing right now. “Dialogue is the cherry on top, it does not support the ice-cream sundae underneath. It’s an added little thing. The real storytelling, the real structuring which is something in TV we often do is all the writers are together in a room and develop the scaffolding or skeleton of the story.” Gilligan (2009).

The dramatic need of the characters is what drives the script forward but that’s not able to be done without structure. The writers of Breaking Bad talk a lot about thinking what the characters would do in every situation they were planning on writing. If the audience doesn’t believe the character would act like they’re acting, chances are there is something wrong with the writing. First comes structure and building of the ‘skeleton’ of the series or episode, then comes the dialogue and how the characters would react to each situation. My third year film will look at a character’s inner monologue while also trying to tackle

psychological issues so my research for my character began awhile ago. I don't want my character to come off one dimensional or gimmicky so I've been working hard and looking at characters from Breaking Bad has helped me greatly to develop my character further. I want my character to be original and be respectful to mental illnesses while also not making my character a walking cliché. I've written extensive character bio's and essays about the twisted past of my main character which has given depth to his personality and actions but working out how to give my script 'that special something' has been an issue for me in the pre-production stage. Attention to detail is a massive thing I've noticed in many scripts I've enjoyed reading. The little things that a lot of people will miss on first viewing that give the film or TV show much more depth and make them want to rewatch it. I aim to make my film about 10-15 minutes and I really want to pack as much detail as I can into it. The best way to give details of your character are through pictures and not dialogue so I plan to pack my set design full of hidden things you'll have to watch multiple times to notice.

Obsession and creative detail go a long way to making a film feel more complete and satisfying. Breaking Bad is a great example of how things often turn out when artistic goals take lead over business goals. Maybe 'that special something' is the artists behind the project caring about their final products and obsessing over every little detail. Big budget films can often feel empty and soulless. The script may 'work' and follow the right structure but you can't just hit all the required plot points and expect your film to be done. If you treat your film too much like a formula, the film won't work; hitting plot points and following a structure doesn't mean your film will be a success. Everything in Breaking Bad belongs in the series; you take one of the five series out and the series would be missing a vital piece of the structure. That is what good scriptwriting looks like. Well developed characters, stories, and structure are all imperative to the show's wide critical acclaim. Every time I rewatch the show, I learn something new or I will see something that I didn't see before. The depth to the show amazes me and has taught me so much about filmmaking and scriptwriting more than any other. I love coming up with new ideas for films but my character development needs to improve; an idea is nothing without structure and well written characters. Looking

inwards and dissecting what my strengths and weaknesses are as a screenwriting during the process of this dissertation proposal has been rewarding. I've learned a lot about what I can do and what my limitations are while writing scripts and producing them and it's taught me so much about myself. I've learned that from absorbing information and advice from the great screenwriters and filmmakers while also adding my own twist on things is the key to my future success in making films. I hope to add 'that special something' to my future films, an attention to detail and obsession that makes my film feel complete and satisfying. Can I write a script and direct a film that has 'that special something'?

Work Cited

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