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Writing a Photoplay



A GUIDE FOR BEGINNERS

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WRITING A PHOTOPLAY



Accurate information for those who
seek self-advancement in the
art of photoplaywriting



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Writing a Photoplay

To the person who has a fair education, some little perseverance, and a good imagination, a big field lies open—the field of photoplay writing. Photoplay writing does not call for any great literary ability. It is the person who works out snappy plots, creates thrilling or amusing incidents, and writes in the clear and brief explanatory style that film corporations desire, who is successful.

That there is a big demand for catchy photoplays is shown by the fact that all the big film corporations whose headquarters are situated in or near Los Angeles, Cal., daily advertise in the leading papers throughout the country, for photoplays.

These companies are expending large amounts of money in this way, but they can afford it. Here, there, they find unknown writers—boys, girls, young men, young women, and adults, who have had little or no education, but who possess all the requirements, a little perseverance, and some little imagination.

In short, it is the person with the ability to create good plots, not the great literary person, who is successful in the photoplay field.

Bright, original plots are wanted. Manufacturers are paying from \$10.00 to \$25.00 and upwards, according to the merits and possibilities of the play. For the great emotional plays as are being produced by the Famous Players Company, as high as \$500.00 is paid.

Of course, the beginner can not expect to write such plays at the start. But with ambition and energy, anyone can succeed. No matter what profession you choose, you must start at the bottom and work up.

If you are energetic and do not become discouraged if your first play is not accepted, you are the one who will meet with success. Remember! When you have had one play accepted, your chance to sell another is doubled. That is, in time you become known, and will experience no difficulty in selling all the photoplays you can turn out.

Before you start writing it is necessary that you acquire a certain technical knowledge of how to put your plots in acceptable form. Read the following pages carefully! Your play **MUST** be written in this form to receive the attention of the play-reader.

Technically speaking, your play should be written in **SCENARIO FORM**. The scenario is the manuscript from which the play is performed. It should describe briefly, clearly and concisely, the action of each scene of the play. Since photoplays are acted in pantomime, no dialogue is used in the scenario. The main thing to keep in mind in scenario writing is: **BE BRIEF**. Your play will receive no attention if written in a long drawn-out manner, such as in the scene which follows:

Scene 1—Many-gabled house, with front and side porches, setting, surrounded by a number of tall fir trees which spread their branches out protectingly over it, quite a distance back from the road. Jim, in a pair of patched overalls and worn coat, pushing a mower over the gent'y sloping

lawn. Fred Wright enters by way of front gate, and, after pausing a moment, goes to Jim. Jim recognizes his old school companion and they shake hands, each pleased to see the other. Finally Jim indicates to come into the house with him. They go to the big oaken door and enter.

Instead, write it as follows:

Scene 1—Front of house; Jim mowing grass; Wright enters gate; pauses; goes to Jim; both pleased, greet each other; exeunt in front door.

Note the use of the semi-colon in the above scene. Some photoplaywrights prefer the dash, others the colon. It is generally conceded, however, with the best writers of the photodrama that the semi-colon is the proper punctuation. It plainly separates each clause of the scene, making it so clear that the play-reader can sum up the full action of the scene at one glance, and save a world of valuable time. The dash is confusing and the colon calls for too long a pause.

It is a good plan, when you have completed your scenario, to have some friend, in whose judgment you have confidence, read and criticize it. Doing this does not reflect on your abilities as a photoplaywright, but, on the other hand, is a wise move, since your friend might find scenes, which, though clear to you, who are author of the play, are not plain to him, and would not be understood by the play-reader.

Do not be in a hurry to submit your scenario. Read it and read it again, making all corrections and eliminating objectionable features. If you find you can make briefer any part of the manuscript, do so. The briefer, the better. Don't be satisfied

with good enough. Make it better. Remember! The play-reader will make no corrections, however small your mistakes may be. Better turn out one good scenario a week, than a dozen poor ones a day.

In your descriptions write as follows:

Field hospital, dance hall, modest dining-room, bedroom, office, kitchen, handsomely furnished smoking room, roadway, ante-room of office, stretch of road, city street, veranda, stretch of railroad, etc.

Although murders, horrible accidents, kidnaping and like subjects are permissible, they are gradually dieing out. At present the public demands strong emotional plays, good sound moral plays, and wholesome comedy. More and more, are manufacturers seeing that the old kind of comedy, the "slapstick" kind, is not demanded by the public. Funny situations are wanted!

If you wonder what a GOOD comedy is and what the public wants, see the photoplays in which Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Drew appear. Such comedies are making a big hit. They are what the public wants!

It is quite possible that you believe the supply of photoplay plots is pretty well exhausted. If so, you are sadly mistaken. Everywhere are plots, waiting to be developed.

Read the newspapers! There are amusing and thrilling incidents happening every day, every hour, and it is in the newspaper that they are printed. Remember! Truth is stranger than fiction.

All manuscripts should be typewritten. No company will consider a pen script.

Use paper 8½ x 11 inches, and double space all matter.

Procure two envelopes, one 3⅞ x 8⅞, another 4⅛ x 9½ inches. Address the larger one to the film company, and the smaller one to yourself. Do not forget to stamp the smaller envelope so your manuscript will be returned in case it is not accepted.

For the convenience of the manufacturer write "Scenario Department" in the lower left-hand corner of the envelope.

Captions constitute all explanatory matter thrown on the screen, such as: John realizes that he has been deceived by the actor; The hate which Elsa learned in childhood grows; When winter has gone and sorrows are banished.

The caption is one of the most powerful agents employed in the screening of the photoplay. It must explain in a few words the thought of any scene which can not be made clear by the mere actions of the players. It has something of the same use as the chapter headings of a novel.

Captions make a play realistic. Without them or inserts, the characters would be unidentified, and the play would be wanting in all the little human touches that warm the heart and pitch the emotions of the audience.

Do not employ the caption to tell of an action that is to follow in the scene. Take the following:

Scene—Office. Mulford discovered standing by desk; has taken a bottle marked poison from a drawer. Shudders at the sight of it, then gulps down the contents.....It would have been superfluous and incorrect to have captioned: Mul-

ford drinks the poison. The action in the scene already shows such to be the case. Use captions only when it is necessary to enlighten the audience.

Fully as important as the caption is the insert, which constitutes all dialogue, letters, telegrams, etc., inserted in the appropriate place in a scene, the film being cut for the purpose. Illustrations of the different inserts follow:

The telegram:

“Will meet you at the old mill at
8 o'clock to-night.

Fred.”

The letter:

Dear Jim:—

The game's up—Harkwell has discovered your hiding place and has the evidence. I leave to marry Count Duboque, since you are at the bottom financially. Good-bye and forgive me.

Helen.

The news item heading:

YOUTH FACING
DEATH IN CHAIR

Kumrow Quickly Convicted of
Murder of Friend, Which
He Had Confessed.

Another type of insert which is used often and effectively is the close view. To make clear to our readers the close view, we insert a sample scene.

Scene A—Living room. John discovered in chair reading. Butler enters with telegram. John takes it and reads.

Insert close view of John's trembling hand tracing words of telegram.

Scene A—(Continued).

This scene is made much more emphatic by the inserted close view. We are shown the contents of the telegram and the effect its reading has on John. **His hand trembles.** The close view emphasizes this fact which would be lost in a more general scene.

The close view is a mark of cleverness in a photoplay, when properly used. By inserting a close view of a person's face, the emotions which may be gripping him at that time may be clearly shown. A calling card, an inscription on a gravestone, a miniature photograph, may be brought, as it were, close to our eyes.

Another commonly used insert is the vision insert, which makes clear to the audience the thoughts of a particular person. Take the following:

Scene B—Veranda. Grace discovered in chair; wistful expression; closes her eyes. Fade to

Insert vision. . . . Platform at station. Train waiting. Fade to

Insert vision close view. . . . John and Grace by steps of train in fond embrace; John boards train which starts; Grace wistful. Fade to

Scene B (Continued)—Grace has opened her eyes, arms opened as though to take John.

Letters, telegrams, calling cards, and like things which are inanimate, are merely inserts. Close views of hand, face, etc., under stress of an emotion, are close-view inserts.

Last on the list of commonly used inserts is the dialôgue, used in the sense of a speech made by one person. Conversations should be strictly avoided, and can not be properly used in a photoplay. An example of the dialôgue follows:

Insert Spoken line. . . . "You shall regret your actions, Monsieur!"

This completes the list of inserts. Keep in mind that when you use an insert, the scene which you are cutting should be continued as:

Scene C—John enters, etc., etc.

Insert—

Scene C (Continued)—John goes to leave, etc., etc.

Take great care in selecting a title for your scenario. Make it short and catchy. If the play-reader looks at your play to find a long, uninteresting, misspelled title, he will look no further.

In regard to price. If you care to set a price on your scenario you are privileged to do so. Write in the upper left-hand corner of the first page, "Submitted for consideration at \$25.00," or whatever you may consider it worth. If you leave the price to the manufacturer, write simply, "Submitted at usual rates."

A short synopsis not to exceed 400 words—make it shorter if possible—should be written when your scenario is completed and placed on a separate sheet at the beginning.

The following scenario has been written with great care by the editor of this pamphlet with the idea of clearly showing to the beginner how long and in what form a one-reel scenario should be written.

Do not merely read this scenario and think you can write a play. Study it! Practice writing it from memory, and then work out a plot of your own.

Submitted at usual rates.

Name

Address

THE GHOST OF WILLERTON HOUSE

Synopsis.

John Wright, a wealthy young man, inherits a large and somewhat antique house on the death of his uncle. To obtain a change he goes to live there. A certain Barton, a forester, shows a remarkable interest in the walls in John's house, going as far as to enter the house at night and rap on them. John discovers him one night and he escapes, but drops a letter from Sherburne, the executor of the will, which shows Sherburne and Barton to be in league, and hunting for hidden wealth in the house. John visits Sherburne and gives him a calling down.

Barton bestows his effections on Helen Grant, a neighbor of John. She resents and John gives Barton a lesson for his conduct. Barton attempts to frighten John into leaving the house by playing ghost, but fails. Failing in this he attempts Wright's life. Helen interferes and saves John.

(Begin a new page)

THE GHOST OF WILLERTON HOUSE.

Scenario.

Caption 1—At the death of his uncle, John Inherits Willerton House.

Scene 1—Living room. John discovered in chair smoking; servant enters with mail; John takes letter; dismisses servant; reads:

Insert 1—Letter—

Mr. John Wright,
Boston, Mass.

Dear Sir:

It is my duty as executor of your uncle's will to inform you that you are made heir to Willerton House and the surrounding land. The house is now at your disposal and all arrangements for your arrival, should you desire to take up your residence there, have been completed.

Hoping this will meet with your approval,

I am,
Very truly yours,
William T. Sherburne.

Scene 1 (Continued)—John finishes reading; indicates he will go; rises and leaves room after instructing servant whom he summons.

Scene 2—Station. Train coming into picture; comes to stop; John among passengers who get off; inquires way from station agent and leaves.

Scene 3—Front of house. John enters picture; goes up drive to door; rings bell; butler ushers him in.

Scene 4—Living room. Butler ushers John in; John seats himself; butler leaves.

Caption 2—The butler resents the intruding of the forester.

Scene 5—Kitchen. Barton, forester, eating apple; butler enters; forester greets him; butler angry; hot discussion follows; Barton sulkily leaves.

Scene 6—Same as 4—Living room. John reading; butler enters and indicates dinner is served; they exeunt.

Scene 7—Dining room. Butler enters, followed by John; John seats himself and eats.

Scene 8—Cottage in woods. Barton comes into picture; enters cottage.

Scene 9—Inside of cottage. Barton enters; seats himself.

Scene 10—Same as 4—Living room. John reading; rings for butler; indicates he would like to be shown to his room; they exeunt into hall.

Scene 11—Same as 9—Inside of cottage. Barton smoking; takes hammer from table; puts on hat and exits.

Caption 3—Barton unaware that John has arrived, and believing the butler to be out, enters Willerton House.

Scene 12—Outside of house. Barton comes stealthily from trees; goes to house; tries window and pushing it up enters.

Scene 13—Same as 4—Living room. Barton enters by way of window; takes a hammer from his pocket and taps on walls, listening all the while.

Scene 14—Bedroom. John sleeping; awakes; alert; rises and puts on slippers; exits.

Scene 15—Same as 4—Living room. Barton still tapping walls; John enters and turns on electricity; Barton startled and dives out the window when John asks him what he is doing there; John angry; shuts and locks window; stands thinking; sees crumpled piece of paper on the floor; picks it up and reads:

Insert 2—Part of letter—and I well know that Wright was a wealthy man. He bequeathed the house to his nephew and a small sum to charities. Where did the rest go? Make careful search of the house and report to me.

W. Sherburne.

Scene 15 (Continued)—John finishes reading; nods head knowingly; butler enters; John says it is all right; they exeunt.

Caption 4—The next days brings an understanding with Sherburne.

Scene 16—Office. Sherburne writing; John enters; gives Sherburne his card; Sherburne seems pleased; offers hand; John disregards it and shows Sherburne the letter; Sherburne attempts an explanation.

Insert 3—“I desire no explanation Mr. Sherburne.”

Scene 16 (Continued)—John angered; will not listen to Sherburne; turns sharply and exits.

Caption 5—Helen resents Barton's affections.

Scene 17—Wood. Helen walking along; Barton comes up and speaks to her; she pays no attention and starts to walk away; Barton goes closer; seizes and attempts to kiss her; they struggle.

Scene 18—Woods. John walking; stops; registers sound and turning shows wide-awake expression; rushes off.

Scene 19—Same as 17—Wood. Helen and Barton struggling; John rushes into picture; gives Barton a shove, knocking him to the ground; Barton rising draws a revolver; John seizes and disarms him; tells him to go; Barton leaves and John and Helen converse; Mr. Grant enters picture; Helen explains circumstances; Grant pleased; all walk off through woods.

Scene 20—Woods. The three of Scene 19 walking along; come to where John's way parts; he makes adieu and leaves.

Scene 21—Woods. John walking; stops and looks back, longingly; continues on way.

Scene 22—Woods. Helen and father walking. Helen turns and smiles.

Caption 6—Barton, the only one knowing of certain secret passages in Willerton House, decides to frighten John into leaving by playing ghost.

Scene 23—Same as 9—Inside of cottage. Barton thinking; gets up and exits.

Scene 24—Same as 12—Outside of house. Barton enters picture; creeps over to the house; tries living room window; tries another; makes entry by way of cellar window.

Scene 25—Same as 4—Living room. Barton enters from an inner door; looks all around; exits into hall.

Scene 26—Stairs. Barton coming stealthily up stairs.

Scene 27—Upper hall. Barton reaches top of stairs and examines wall of hallway; presses a point on the wall; a door opens; Barton takes candle from his pocket and lights it; enters.

Scene 28—Inside of narrow passage-way. Barton enters; closes door and begins to walk, using no stealth.

Scene 29—Same as 14—Bedroom. John sleeping; awakes; registers sound; goes to door and looks out; goes out.

Scene 30—Same as 27—Upper hall. John comes out of room and listens. Butler enters picture. They are puzzled to know where the walking is.

Scene 31—Same as 28—Narrow passageway. Barton stops walking; smiles wickedly.

Scene 32—Same as 27—Upper hall. After consultation John and butler leave scene.

Caption 7—To prove he is not a coward.

Scene 33—Same as 9—Inside of cottage. Barton smoking; suddenly takes letter from his pocket and reads:

Insert 3—Letter.

Dear Barton:

From the reading of your last letter I find that after all you are a coward. With a fortune within reach you fail to act. If you cannot succeed while Wright lives, silence him.

Yours truly,

William Sherburne.

Scene 33 (Continued)—Barton angrily puts letter in pocket; takes revolver from drawer of table and fondles it; indicates he'll show Sherburne; exits.

Scene 34—Woods. Helen walking along with rifle; watchful for game.

Scene 35—Same as 3—Front of house. John comes out front door and goes off into woods.

Scene 36—Woods Barton walking along.

Scene 37—Woods. John walking along; stops and views scenery.

Scene 38—Woods. Barton walking; stops and begins creeping along on hands and knees. Gets revolver out to shoot; takes aim.

Scene 39—Woods. Helen standing, looking for game; startled expression; rushes off.

Scene 40—Same as 38—Woods. Barton aiming with revolver; Helen comes up behind him with gun and orders him to drop his weapon. He obeys.

Scene 41—Same as 37—Woods. John turns and exits.

Scene 42—Same as 40—Woods. John enters picture; greets Helen; looks at Barton; sees revolver on ground and picks it up; Helen explains; Barton cringes when John makes a move toward him; John empties revolver of cartridges and gives it to Barton; tells him to go; Barton slinks off. John turns to Helen; love scene follows. Fade out.

The End.

For convenience of readers of this pamphlet, the editor has compiled at considerable expense, a complete list of all the film companies in the United States in the market for scenarios. The list follows:

All Star Feature Film Co., 514 West 8th St., Los Angeles, Cal.

American Film Mfg. Co., Ashland Block, Chicago.

Apollo Film Co., 4500 Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles, Cal.

Balboa Amusement Co., 806 Security Bldg., Chicago.

Beauty Films, Santa Barbara, Cal.

Biograph Co., 807 East 175th St., New York City.

Broncho Film Co., 1712 Allesandro St., Los Angeles, Cal.

Belmar Film Co., 1451 Broadway, New York City.

California Film Exchange, 734 South Olive St., Los Angeles, Cal.

Colorado Motion Picture Co., Canon City, Colorado.

Domino Film Co., Longacre Bldg., New York City.

Dragon Film Co., 220 West 42d St., New York City.

Eclair Film Co., 126 West 46th St., New York City.

Essanay Film Co., 43 West 39th St., New York City.

Famous Players Co., 128 West 56th St., New York City.

Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Co., Vine and Selina Sts., Los Angeles, Cal.

Kalem Co., 235 West 23d St., New York City.

Kay-Bee Film Corporation, Longacre Bldg., New York City.

Keystone Film Co., Longacre Bldg., New York City.

Kinemacolor Co., 1600 Broadway, New York City.

Komic Film Co., 4500 Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles, Cal.

Lubin Mfg. Co., Indiana Ave., Philadelphia, Pa.
Majestic Film Co., 4500 Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles,
Cal.
Masterpiece Film Co., 1327 Gordon St., Los
Angeles, Cal.
Mutual Film Co., 4500 Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles,
Cal.
New York Film Corporation, Longacre Bldg., New
York City.
Norbig Film Mfg. Co., 1745 Allesandro St., Los
Angeles, Cal.
North American Film Co., 111 Broadway, New
York City.
Olcott Film Co., 737 Tallyrand Ave., Jacksonville,
Fla.
Pathe Film Co., 25 West 45th St., New York City.
Princess Film Co., New Rochelle, N. Y.
Ramo Film Co., 102 West 101st St., New York City.
Reliance Film Co., 4500 Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles,
Cal.
Selig Film Co., 1600 Broadway, New York City.
Solax Company, Fort Lee, N. J.
Thanhouser Film Co., New Rochelle, N. Y.
Thomas A. Edison, Inc., 2826 Decatur Ave., Bed-
ford Pk., Bronx.
Universal Film Mfg. Co., 1600 Broadway, New
York City.
Vitagraph Co., East -15th St. and Locust Ave.,
New York City.

Note—Scenarios intended for submission to the
Reliance, Majestic, Komic and Appollo Companies,
should be addressed to the Mutual Film Corpora-
tion, Scenario Bureau, 4500 Sunset Blvd., Los
Angeles, Cal.

Do not think you can write a "salable" scenario in a day. Even experienced writers take a week at least.

Keep a notebook handy. When an idea enters your mind jot it down. Then when you have time you can develop your thought.

Do not plagiarize. Infringement on copyrighted books or other publications is punishable by law.

When you visit a picture show consider that you are in a school. Study the pictures! Note the kind that the manufacturers are producing. When you write a play use judgment in sending it away. Keep in touch with the kinds of plays produced by different companies. Send your play to the company which is producing plays of a similar style.

Keep in mind that if you intended to be a carpenter, a doctor, a clergyman, or intended to take up any profession, you would expect to have to work hard to succeed in it.

If you would succeed as a photoplaywright you must work; but it is pleasant work. Mark Twain, the noted humorist, gave three rules for the "Would-be Author." They hold true for the "Would-be Photoplaywright." The first was write; the second was write; the third was write.

Follow that advice, don't get discouraged, and you are bound to be successful.

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