The Power of Scriptwriting!

Teaching Essential Writing Skills Through Podcasts, Graphic Novels, Movies, and More

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guiding students through the scriptwriting activities in the pages that follow, bear in mind the traits of concision, organization, precision, and audience in order to turn every script project into an exercise in practical writing. (Because these hallmarks of practical writing provide a common basis for evaluating all scripts, you'll see them mentioned in the writing rubrics in Appendix C.)

Concision. Being concise is important to high-quality writing in most contexts. However, in scriptwriting it's even more crucial because those who read the script as a practical text need to quickly and easily absorb the information that's necessary for their jobs: They don't have time to sift through extensive verbiage or purple prose.

In addition, scripts are often expected to reflect the length of the finished piece–a ten-page script for a 30-second public service announcement (PSA) would be disproportionate. Also, in industries such as film and television, there's a rule of thumb that states that one page of text equals roughly 1 minute of screentime. Therefore, extraneous information prevents scriptwriters' reader-collaborators from getting a true sense of the runtime of the final product.

Organization. The proper ordering of information in a script means *everything*. If readers don't encounter text and ideas in an order that makes sense to them, it really won't matter how good the content is. As in plays, the events and ideas in a script are presented sequentially in a way that corresponds to the order in which audiences will experience them. A narrative script's organization is usually chronological, but not necessarily: Flashbacks and flash-forwards are quite common–adept scriptwriters know how to use them effectively, while beginning scriptwriters simply have fun with them. However, there is no set order for how a script might be produced, and artists and directors can skip around in the text to draw or shoot material as they see fit.

For this reason, scripts present information in ways that follow particular conventions very closely. For example, the data contained in headings (which are sometimes numbered) allow readers to skim and scan scripts to find specific information or scenes quickly and easily. Then, within scenes, descriptions of settings are usually followed by general actions, then precise directions for delivering dialogue, and finally the dialogue itself. Although such an organizational approach to text may seem rigid when compared with prose, it actually provides a much-needed sense of reliability to readers.

Precision. Scriptwriters need to employ an appropriate tone and specific word choice. The latter, in fact, is a form of concision as well–when a young screenwriter knows the term ***pan***, for instance, that eliminates the need to describe the camera as "moving in a horizontal way in a continuous shot." And because precise terminology is important, be sure to draw attention to the items in the Learn the Lingo features throughout the book so that you can help your students speak and write like pros. (For vocabulary related to media more generally, or for terms covered in chapters other than the one at hand, simply turn to the Glossary.)

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a small group made up of both friends and adults. Their tone should be conversational, but clear and using *language*–not a tone–that sounds slightly formal.

- In PSAs, news spots, and other expository or persuasive scripts, students should avoid having an anchor, announcer, or reporter quote somebody else directly. Instead, they should paraphrase that person: Attempting a direct quote too often results in awkward mimicry.
- Encourage students to practice many times and coach them not to expect to get it right the first time. Practicing reading scripts–that is, rehearsing them–provides the kind of repetition that is also great for building fluency, which is especially important for English Language Learners (Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass, & Gorsuch, 2004).

To maximize speaking and listening benefits, spend extra time reviewing with students what they may already know about writing effective dialogue. Remind them that since characters in radio dramas can't be shown and an external narrator must be used sparingly, dialogue must convey the lion's share of the action.

Also, point out that humorous dialogue can function effectively as comic relief, but to do so it must work in the context of a dramatic scene or relevant information (in nonfiction broadcasts, such as radio programs one might hear on NPR). It can't strike the listener as a stand-alone joke that was simply shoehorned into the script to get laughs.

Finally, explain that dialogue in drama and spoken text in other audio scripts should be energetic and connective–it keeps things moving and listeners listening. Students should avoid extended monologues, a monotone delivery style, and straight readings of passages that were originally intended solely as print texts.

LITERACY ACROSS THE DISCIPLINES: TIME-TRAVEL DIALOGUES

Encourage students to script monologues by famous figures from history, making sure that the text is informed by research and/or the content-area reading they're already doing in other disciplines. Provide as needed script and video samples of one-person shows based upon people such as Golda Meir, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Mark Twain, and so on. Once students have developed a deep sense of how these people lived, what they believed, and how they spoke, challenge students to collaborate on a "Meeting of Minds"–style dialogue.

What would Thomas Jefferson say to Abraham Lincoln if the two met? Or what might Einstein have learned from Sally Ride if they had ever had a chance to hold a conversation?

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If possible, scan and display the page for the whole group, and invite students to mark each of these approaches with a different color to conduct a visual analysis of the strategies employed.

Very quickly they should begin to appreciate how effective writers use a balanced approach to create three-dimensional characters in a way that also helps vary the narrative presentation. Supplement your text-specific analysis with the following critical-thinking questions that build an appreciation of how scripts leverage the medium's formal features to develop characters:

- What would the effect be on readers if you only read what other characters said or thought about a character but never encountered a word balloon or a caption? (Sample answer: The character might seem distant to us as we are never given an "interior" view.)
- How would readers feel if a disproportionate amount of information were conveyed through a know-it-all narrator, with hardly any spoken dialogue or thought balloons? (Sample answer: Readers might feel that the character is not real to them but rather just an "idea.")
- What impression would you have of a character who has several lengthy **thought bubbles** on every page? (Sample answer: The character thinks too much, "living inside" his or head. Or a reader might feel that the story is slow, with not enough action.)

When it comes to writing their own scripts, students should therefore bear in mind that the way the character *appears*, the *information* provided in a caption, and the *text* in balloons and bubbles all work together to create compelling characters to which readers feel connected.

In addition, there are three optional tools that you can use to enrich the process of teaching characterization with comics. Even students who might not typically be engaged by the process of developing characters will probably be motivated by one of the following:

- *Series "bible"*. This is an updatable document of no set length that anchors the creative decisions that are made in a comics series or even a comics "universe." It's where all new writers or artists turn to learn the history of the characters and their adventures and to maintain continuity with stories that already exist. You can motivate reluctant prose writers through this combination of expository writing (it's informational in nature) and creative writing (the information is largely made up) by assigning it as a precursor to scripting. Or consider having students loosely collaborate in small groups by having them share some of the same cast of characters. Then they can work together to draft a common bible, perhaps with each member taking on a separate aspect of their shared fictional world (biographies, settings, and so on).

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Ask students to think about their favorite television show. How could they persuade others to watch a summertime rerun of an episode that the students themselves have already seen but which the target members of the viewing audience have not? Provide a two-column (T-chart-like) script template with the heads "Video" and "Audio" (see the model that follows or the annotated one later in the chapter) and have them fill in the video column with descriptions of clips they think would sell the show. Any dialogue as well as voice-over narration should go in the audio column. Additional graphics, such as text that tells when the episode will air, should go in the video column. Supply prompts with phrases typical of on-air promos:

- Next time on . . .
- Ever wonder how . . . ?
- Will X do Y . . . ? Or will A do B . . . ? (a device called "the unanswered question")
- The moment the nation has been waiting for . . .

Students who are not fans of any particular TV series can have the option of writing a promo for an upcoming sports broadcast. Or, if you'd like to use the idea of writing a promo without tying it directly to television content, have students compose a parody of one that promotes a real-life event, as the script shown here does.

On-Air Promo for Geology Class **1**

VIDEO	AUDIO
Closed door to classroom	Music: low chord, rumbling and ominous
Door suddenly swings open	Narrator: Next time in geology class . . .
Close-ups on student faces, some anxious	Narrator: Will everyone pass the pop quiz? Who will survive . . .
Broken pencil tossed into a trashcan	Narrator: . . . and who won't?
Text on screen: Geology, Third Period, M-F.	Narrator: Geology—don't miss the excitement.

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APPENDIX B

Revision Checklists

Scriptwriting Revision Checklist—General Application

Name: _____

Date: _____

If you are writing . . .	Did you make sure to . . .	✓
a script for any medium	• address the expectations of both the primary and secondary audiences?	
	• use formal elements (e.g., kinds of shots, sound effects, word balloons) in ways that convey information effectively and not just for their own sake?	
	• follow any and all writing guidelines that apply from analogous writing products in prose (e.g., expository video or podcast segments that quote reliable sources, film scripts that have strong dialogue and dramatic tension)?	
a monologue, multimedia event, or script for any other live-performance medium	• allow room for the performer or host to contribute creatively, such as by interpreting the text in his or her own style?	
	• include delivery directions for performers where appropriate to signal emotion or volume?	
	• match the spoken text and content to the venue as well as to any other media elements (e.g. screen projections, music)?	
	• write material of the correct length so that speakers don't have to read your script too fast or too slowly?	
an oral history, reality TV–inspired video, or other documentary-style script	• respect the privacy of your subject(s) and honor any agreements, explicit or implicit, that you made previously?	
	• include strong voice-over or on-screen text transitions between video segments where necessary?	
	• appropriate media products from other sources in a way that complies with Fair Use guidelines or copyright regulations?	
a picture book or multimedia presentation with text	• consciously decide when you want the images and text to reinforce the same information and when you want them to diverge somewhat, with each element conveying complementary information?	
	• follow the basic strategies of visual storytelling that you know from fine art, comics, or film, and adapt them as needed?	
	• capitalize on any audio elements despite the central role of images and text? In multimedia this might mean an underlying music bed, and in a picture book it means the sound and texture of certain words as they are read aloud.	

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